



SHE CUT HERSELF OPENING THE ENVELOPE.

Kestrel had been eager, she'd been a fool, tearing into the letter simply because it had been addressed in Herrani script. The letter opener slipped. Seeds of blood hit the paper and bloomed bright.

It wasn't, of course, from him. The letter was from Herran's new minister of agriculture. He wrote to introduce himself, and to say he looked forward to when they would meet. *I believe you and I have much in common and much to discuss*, he wrote.

Kestrel wasn't sure what he meant by that. She didn't know him, or even of him. Although she supposed she would have to meet with the minister at some point—she was, after all, the imperial ambassador to the now independent territory of Herran—Kestrel didn't anticipate spending time with the minister of *agriculture*. She had nothing to say on crop rotation or fertilizer.

Kestrel caught the haughty tone of her thoughts. She

felt the way it thinned her mouth. She realized that she was furious at this letter.

At herself. At the way her heart had leaped to see her name scrawled in the Herrani alphabet on the envelope. She had hoped so hard that it was from Arin.

But she'd had no contact with him for nearly a month, not since she'd offered him his country's freedom. And the envelope hadn't even been addressed in his hand. She knew his writing. She knew the fingers that would hold the pen. Blunt-cut nails, silver scars from old burns, the calloused scrape of his palm, all very at odds with his elegant cursive. Kestrel should have known right away that the letter wasn't from him.

But still: the quick slice of paper. Still: the disappointment.

Kestrel set aside the letter. She pulled the silk sash from her waist, threading it out from under the dagger that she, like all Valorians, wore strapped to her hip. She wound the sash around her bleeding hand. She was ruining the sash's ivory silk. Her blood spotted it. But a ruined sash didn't matter, not to her. Kestrel was engaged to Prince Verex, heir to the Valorian empire. The proof of it was marked daily on her brow in an oiled, glittering line. She had sashes upon sashes, dresses upon dresses, a river of jewels. She was the future empress.

Yet when she stood from her carved ebony chair, she was unsteady. She looked around her study, one of many rooms in her suite, and was unsettled by the stone walls, the corners set insistently into perfect right angles, the way two

narrow hallways cut into the room. It should have made sense to Kestrel, who knew that the imperial palace was also a fortress. Tight hallways were a way to bottleneck an invading force. Yet it looked unfriendly and alien. It was so different from her home.

Kestrel reminded herself that her home in Herran had never really been hers. She may have been raised in that colony, but she was Valorian. She was where she was supposed to be. Where she had chosen to be.

The cut had stopped bleeding.

Kestrel left the letter and went to change her day dress for dinner. This was her life: rich fabric and watered silk trim. A dinner with the emperor . . . and the prince.

Yes, this was her life.

She must get used to it.

The emperor was alone. He smiled when she entered his stone-walled dining room. His gray hair was cropped in the same military style as her father's, his eyes dark and keen. He didn't stand from the long table to greet her.

"Your Imperial Majesty." She bowed her head.

"Daughter." His voice echoed in the vaulted chamber. It rang against the empty plates and glasses. "Sit."

She moved to do so.

"No," he said. "Here, at my right hand."

"That's the prince's place."

"The prince, it seems, is not here."

She sat. Slaves served the first course. They poured white

wine. She could have asked why he had summoned her to dinner, and where the prince might be, but Kestrel had seen how the emperor loved to shape silence into a tool that pried open the anxieties of others. She let the silence grow until it was of her making as well as his, and only when the third course arrived did she speak. “I hear the campaign against the east goes well.”

“So your father writes from the front. I must reward him for an excellently waged war. Or perhaps, Lady Kestrel, it’s you I should reward.”

She drank from her cup. “His success is none of my doing.”

“No? *You* urged me to put an end to the Herrani rebellion by giving that territory self-governance under my law. *You* argued that this would free up troops and money to fuel my eastern war, and lo”—he flourished a hand—“it did. What clever advice from one so young.”

His words made her nervous. If he knew the real reason she had argued for Herrani independence, she would pay for it. Kestrel tried the painstakingly prepared food. There were boats made from a meat terrine, their sails clear gelatin. She ate slowly.

“Don’t you like it?” said the emperor.

“I’m not very hungry.”

He rang a golden bell. “Dessert,” he told the serving boy who instantly appeared. “We’ll skip ahead to dessert. I know how young ladies enjoy sweet things.” But when the boy returned bearing two small plates made from porcelain so fine Kestrel could see light sheer through the rims, the emperor said, “None for me,” and one plate was set

before Kestrel along with a strangely light and translucent fork.

She calmed herself. The emperor didn't know the truth about the day she had pushed for an end to the Herrani rebellion. No one did. Not even Arin knew that she had bought his freedom with a few strategic words . . . and the promise to wed the crown prince.

If Arin knew, he would fight it. He'd ruin himself.

If the emperor knew *why* she had done it, he would ruin her.

Kestrel looked at the pile of pink whipped cream on her plate, and at the clear fork, as if they composed the whole of her world. She must speak cautiously. "What need have I of a reward, when you have given me your only son?"

"And such a prize he is. Yet we've no date set for the wedding. When shall it be? You've been quiet on the subject."

"I thought Prince Verex should decide." If the choice were left to the prince, the wedding date would be never.

"Why don't *we* decide?"

"Without him?"

"My dear girl, if the prince's slippery mind cannot remember something so simple as the day and time of a dinner with his father and lady, how can we expect him to plan any part of the most important state event in decades?"

Kestrel said nothing.

"You're not eating," he said.

She sank the clear fork into the cream and lifted it to her mouth. The fork's tines dissolved against her tongue. "Sugar," she said with surprise. "The fork is made of hardened sugar."

“Do you like the dessert?”

“Yes.”

“Then you must eat it all.”

But how to finish the cream if the fork continued to dissolve each time she took a mouthful? Most of the fork remained in her hand, but it wouldn't last.

A game. The dessert was a game, the conversation a game. The emperor wanted to see how she would play.

He said, “I think the end of this month would be ideal for a wedding.”

Kestrel ate more of the cream. The tines completely vanished, leaving something that resembled an aborted spoon. “A winter wedding? There will be no flowers.”

“You don't need flowers.”

“If you know that young ladies like dessert, you must also know that they like flowers.”

“I suppose you'd prefer a spring wedding, then.”

Kestrel lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “Summer would be best.”

“Luckily my palace has hothouses. Even in winter, we could carpet the great hall with petals.”

Kestrel silently ate more of the dessert. Her fork turned into a flat stick.

“Unless you want to postpone the wedding,” said the emperor.

“I'm thinking of our guests. The empire is vast. People will come from every province. Winter is a terrible time to travel and spring little better. It rains. The roads become muddy.”

The emperor leaned back in his chair, studying her with an amused expression.

“Also,” she said, “I’d hate to waste an opportunity. You know that the nobles and governors will give you what they can—favours, information, gold—for the best seats at the wedding. The mystery of what I’ll wear and what music will be played will distract the empire. No one would notice if you made a political decision that would otherwise outrage thousands. If I were you, I would enjoy my long engagement. Use it for all its worth.”

He laughed. “Oh, Kestrel. What an empress you will be.” He raised his glass. “To your happy union, on the day of Firstsummer.”

She would have had to drink to that, had not Prince Verex entered the dining room and stopped short, his large eyes showing every shift of emotion: surprise, hurt, anger.

“You’re late,” his father said.

“I am not.” Verex’s hands clenched.

“Kestrel managed to be here on time. Why couldn’t you?”

“Because you told me the wrong hour.”

The emperor tsked. “You misremember.”

“You’re making me look the fool!”

“I am making you look nothing of the kind.”

Verex’s mouth snapped shut. His head bobbed on his thin neck like something caught in a current.

“Come,” Kestrel said gently. “Have dessert with us.”

The look he shot her told Kestrel that he might hate his father’s games, but he hated her pity more. He fled the room.

Kestrel toyed with her stub of a sugar fork. Even after the prince's noisy course down the hall had dwindled into silence, she knew better than to speak.

"Look at me," the emperor said.

She raised her eyes.

"You don't want a summer wedding for the sake of flowers, or guests, or political purchase," he said. "You want to postpone it for as long as possible."

Kestrel held the fork tightly.

"I'll give you what you want, within reason," he said, "and I will tell you why. Because I don't blame you, given your bridegroom. Because you don't whine for what you want, but seek to win it. Like I would. When you look at me, you see who you will become. A ruler. I have chosen you, Kestrel, and will make you into everything my son cannot be. Someone fit to take my place."

Kestrel looked, and her look became a stare that searched for her future in an old man capable of cruelty to his own child.

He smiled. "Tomorrow I'd like for you to meet with the captain of the imperial guard."

She had never met the captain before, but was familiar enough with his role. Officially, he was responsible for the emperor's personal safety. Unofficially, this duty spread to others that no one discussed. Surveillance. Assassinations. The captain was good at making people vanish.

"He has something to show you," the emperor said.

"What is it?"

"A surprise. Now look happy, Kestrel. I'm giving you everything that you could want."

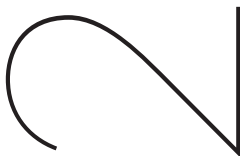
Sometimes the emperor *was* generous. She'd seen audiences with him where he'd given senators private land in new colonies, or powerful seats in the Quorum. But she'd also seen how his generosity tempted others to ask for just a little more. Then his eyes went heavy-lidded, like a cat's, and she would see how his gifts made people reveal what they really wanted.

Nonetheless, she couldn't help hoping that the wedding could be put off for longer than a few months. Firstsummer was better than next week, of course, but still too soon. Much too soon. Would the emperor agree to a year? More? She said, "Firstsummer—"

"Is the perfect date."

Kestrel's gaze fell to her closed hand. It opened with a sweet scent and rested empty on the table.

The sugar fork had vanished against the heat of her palm.



ARIN WAS IN HIS FATHER'S STUDY, WHICH HE probably would never be able to think of as his own, no matter how old the ghosts of his dead family grew.

It was a clear day. The view from the study window showed the city in detail, with its ruined patches left by the rebellion. The pale wafer of a winter sun gave Herran's harbor a blurry glow.

Arin wasn't thinking of her. He wasn't. He was thinking of how slowly the city walls were being rebuilt. Of the hearthnut harvest soon to come in the southern countryside, and how it would bring much-needed food and trade to Herran. He wasn't thinking of Kestrel, or of the past month and a week of not thinking of her. But not thinking was like lifting slabs of rock, and he was so distracted by the strain of it that he didn't hear Sarsine enter the room, or notice his cousin at all until she had shoved an opened letter at him.

The broken seal showed the sigil of crossed swords. A

letter from the Valorian emperor. Sarsine's face told Arin that he wouldn't like what he was about to read.

"What is it?" he asked. "Another tax?" He rubbed his eyes. "The emperor must know we can't pay, not again, not so soon after the last levy. This is ruinous."

"Well, now we see why the emperor so kindly returned Herran to the Herrani."

They had discussed this before. It seemed the only explanation to such an unexpected decision. Revenues from Herran used to go into the pockets of the Valorian aristocrats who had colonized it. Then came the Firstwinter Rebellion and the emperor's decree, and those aristocrats had returned to the capital, the loss of their land named as a cost of war. Now the emperor was able to bleed Herran dry through taxes its people were unable to protest. The territory's wealth flowed directly into imperial coffers.

A devious move. But what worried Arin most was the nagging sense that he was missing something. It had been hard to think that day when Kestrel had handed him the emperor's offer and demands. It had been hard to see anything but the gold line that had marked her brow.

"Just tell me how much it'll cost this time," he said to Sarsine.

Her mouth screwed into a knot. "Not a tax. An invitation." She left the room.

Arin unfolded the paper. His hands went still.

As governor of Herran, Arin was requested to attend a ball in the Valorian capital. *In honor of the engagement of Lady Kestrel to Crown Prince Verex*, read the letter.

Sarsine had called it an invitation, but Arin recognized it for what it was: an order, one that he had no power to disobey, even though he was supposedly no longer a slave.

Arin's eyes lifted from the page and gazed upon the harbor. When Arin had worked on the docks, one of the other slaves was known as the Favor-Keeper.

Slaves had no possessions, or at least nothing that their Valorian conquerors would recognize as such. Even if Arin *had* had something of his own, he had no pockets to hold it. Clothes with pockets went to house slaves only. This was the measure of life under the Valorians: that the Herrani people knew their place according to whether they had pockets and the illusion of being able to keep something private within them.

Yet slaves still had a currency. They traded favors. Extra food. A thicker pallet. The luxury of a few minutes of rest while someone else worked. If a slave on the docks wanted something, he asked the Favor-Keeper, the oldest Herrani among them.

The Favor-Keeper kept a ball of thread with a different-colored string for each man. If Arin had had a request, his string would have been spooled and looped and spindled around another one, perhaps yellow, and that yellow string might have wound its way about a green one, depending on who owed what. The Favor-Keeper's knot recorded it all.

But Arin had had no string. He had asked for nothing. He gave nothing. Already a young man then, he had despised the thought of being in debt to anyone.

Now he studied the Valorian emperor's letter. It was

beautifully inked. Artfully phrased. It fit well with Arin's surroundings, with the liquid-like varnish of his father's desk and the leaded glass windows that shot winter light into the study.

The light made the emperor's words all too easy to read.

Arin crushed the paper into his fist and squeezed hard. He wished for a Favor-Keeper. He would forsake his pride to become a simple string, if only he could have what he wanted.

Arin would trade his heart for a snarled knot of thread if it meant he would never have to see Kestrel again.

He consulted with Tensen. The elderly man studied the uncrumpled and flattened invitation, his pale green eyes gleaming. He set the thick, wrinkled page on Arin's desk and tapped the first line of writing with one dry finger. "This," he said, "is an excellent opportunity."

"Then you'll go," said Arin.

"Of course."

"Without me."

Tensen pursed his lips. He gave Arin that schoolmaster's look that had served him well as a tutor to Valorian children. "Arin. Let's not be proud."

"It's not pride. I'm too busy. You'll represent Herran at the ball."

"I don't think that the emperor will be satisfied with a mere minister of agriculture."

"I don't care for the emperor's satisfaction."

“Sending me, *alone*, will either insult the emperor or reveal to him that I’m more important than I seem.” Tensen rubbed his grizzled jaw, considering Arin. “You need to go. It’s a part you must play. You’re a good actor.”

Arin shook his head.

Tensen’s eyes darkened. “I was there that day.”

The day last summer when Kestrel had bought him.

Arin could feel again the sweat crawling down his back as he waited in the holding pen below in the auction pit. The structure was roofed, which meant that Arin couldn’t see the crowd of Valorians ranged above at ground level, only Cheat in the center of the pit.

Arin smelled the stink of his skin, felt the grit beneath his bare feet. He was sore. As he listened to Cheat’s voice rise and fall in the bantering singsong of an expert auctioneer, he pressed tentative fingers to his bruised cheek. His face was like a rotten fruit.

Cheat had been furious with him that morning. “Two days,” he’d growled. “I rent you out for only *two days* and you come back looking like this. What’s so hard about laying a road and keeping your mouth shut?”

Waiting in the holding pen, not really listening to the drone of the auction, Arin didn’t want to think about the beating and everything that had led up to it.

In truth, the bruises changed nothing. Arin couldn’t fool himself that Cheat would ever be able to sell him into a Valorian household. Valorians cared about their house slaves’ appearance, and Arin didn’t fit the part even when his face wasn’t half-masked in various shades of purple. He looked like a laborer. He *was* one. Laborers were not brought

into the house, and houses were where Cheat needed to plant slaves devoted to the rebellion.

Arin tipped his head back against the rough wood of the pen's wall. He fought his frustration.

There came a long silence in the pit. The lull meant that Cheat had closed the sale while Arin wasn't paying attention and had stepped into the auction house for a break.

Then: a locust-like whirl from the crowd. Cheat was returning to the pit, stepping close to the block on which another slave was about to stand.

To his audience, Cheat said, "I have something very special for you."

Each slave in the holding pen straightened. The afternoon torpor was gone. Even the old man, whose name Arin would later learn was Tensen, became sharply alert.

Cheat had spoken in code. "Something very special" conveyed a secret meaning to the slaves: the chance to be sold in a way to contribute to the rebellion. To spy. Steal. Maybe murder. Cheat had many plans.

It was the *very* in what Cheat had said that made Arin sick with himself, because that word signaled the most important sale of all, the one they'd been waiting for: the opportunity for a rebel to be placed in General Trajan's household.

Who was there, above in the crowd of Valorians?

The general himself?

And Arin, stupid Arin, had squandered his chance at revenge. Cheat would never choose him for the sale.

Yet when the auctioneer turned to face the holding pen,

his eyes looked straight into Arin's. Cheat's fingers twitched twice. The signal.

Arin had been chosen.

"That day," Arin told Tensen as they sat in the winter light of his father's study, "was different. Everything was different."

"Was it? You were ready to do anything for your people then. Aren't you now?"

"It's a *ball*, Tensen."

"It's an opportunity. At the very least, we could use it to find out how much the emperor plans to take of the hearthnut harvest."

The harvest would be soon. Their people needed it badly for food and trade. Arin pressed his fingertips against his brow. A headache was building behind his eyes. "What is there to know? Whatever he will take will be too much."

For a moment, Tensen said nothing. Then, grimly: "I've heard nothing from Thrynne for weeks."

"Maybe he hasn't been able to get out of the palace and into the city to reach our contact."

"Maybe. But we have precious few sources in the imperial palace as it is. This is a dicey time. The empire's elite are pouring out gold to prepare themselves for the most lavish winter season in Valorian history, what with the engagement. And the colonists who once lived in Herran grow increasingly resentful. They didn't like returning their stolen homes to us. They're a minority, and the military is solidly with the emperor, so he can ignore them. But all signs point to the court being a volatile place, and we can never forget that we are at the emperor's mercy. Who knows what

he'll choose to do next? Or how it will affect us? *This*— Tensen nodded at the invitation—“would be a good means to look into Thrynne’s silence. Arin, are you listening? We can’t afford to lose such a well-placed spy.”

Just as Arin had been well-placed. Expertly placed. He hadn’t been sure, that day in the market, how Cheat had known that Arin was the perfect slave to pitch. Cheat had a knack for spotting weakness. An eye for desire. Somehow he had peered into the heart of the bidder and had known how to work her.

Arin hadn’t seen her at first. The sun had blinded him when he stepped into the pit. There was a roar of laughter. He couldn’t see the mass of Valorians above. Yet he heard them. He didn’t mind the prickling shame spidering up his skin. He told himself that he didn’t. He didn’t mind what they said or what he heard.

Then his vision cleared. He blinked the sun away. He saw the girl. She raised one hand to bid.

The sight of her was an assault. He couldn’t quite see her face—he did not *want* to see her face, not when everything else about her made him want to shut his eyes. She looked very Valorian. Golden tones. Burnished, almost, like a weapon raised into the light. He had trouble believing she was a living thing.

And she was clean. A purity of skin and form. It made him feel filthy. It distracted him for a moment from noticing that the girl was small. Slight.

Absurd. It was absurd to think that someone like that could have any power over him. Yet she would, if she won the auction.

He wanted her to. The thought swept Arin with a merciless, ugly joy. He'd never seen her before, but he guessed who she was: Lady Kestrel, General Trajan's daughter.

The crowd heard her bid. And at once it seemed that Arin was worth something after all.

Arin forgot that he was sitting at his father's desk, two seasons later. He forgot that Tensen was waiting for him to say something. Arin was there again in the pit. He remembered staring up at the girl, feeling a hatred as hard as it was pure.

A diamond.



KESTREL DECIDED TO DRESS EXTRAVAGANTLY for her meeting with the captain of the imperial guard. She chose a snow-and-gold brocade dress whose long hem trailed. As always, she strapped her dagger on with care, but this morning she tightened the buckles more than she needed to. She undid and redid them several times.

The captain called for her in her suite as she was finishing her morning cup of spiced milk. He declined to sit while she drank. When he blinked at her dress and hid a brief smirk, Kestrel knew that she wouldn't like wherever they were going. When he didn't suggest that she change into something that wouldn't be so easily sullied, she knew that she didn't like *him*.

"Ready?" said the captain.

She sipped from her cup, eyeing him. He was a hulking man, face scarred across the lip. His jaw had been broken; it jutted left. The captain had an unexpectedly fine, straight-nosed profile, but she had caught only a glimpse of it when he'd glanced around the sitting room to make certain they

were alone. He was someone who preferred to stare face-on. Then his features were all marred.

She wondered what he would do if he knew that she hadn't been an entirely unwilling captive in Arin's house after the Herrani rebellion.

She set the empty cup down on a small table. "Where are we going?"

His smirk was back. "To pay someone a visit."

"Who?"

"The emperor said not to tell."

Kestrel lifted her chin and gazed up at the captain. "What about hints? Did the emperor order you not to give hints, even little tiny ones?"

"Well . . ."

"What about confirming guesses? For example"—she tapped an arpeggio along the edge of the ebony table—"I guess that we are going to the prison."

"Not exactly a tough guess, my lady."

"Shall I try something more challenging? Your hands are clean, but your boots are dirty. Slightly spattered. The spots are shiny; recently dried. Blood?"

He was entertained now. He enjoyed this game.

"You've been up even earlier than I this morning, I see," Kestrel said. "And you've been busy. How incongruous, though, to see blood on your boots and to smell something so nice lingering about you . . . a subtle scent. Vetiver. Expensive. A dose of ambergris. The slight sting of pepper. Oh, captain. Have you been . . . *borrowing* the emperor's perfumed oils?"

He no longer looked amused.

"I'd think that such a good guess deserves a hint, Captain."

He sighed. "I'm taking you to see a Herrani prisoner." The milk curdled in Kestrel's stomach. "Man or woman?" "Man."

"Why is it important that I see him?"

The captain shrugged. "The emperor didn't say."

"But *who*?"

The captain shifted his heavy feet.

"I don't like surprises," Kestrel said, "any more than the emperor gladly shares his oils."

"He's nobody. We're not even sure of his name."

Not Arin. That was all Kestrel could think. It couldn't be him—Herran's governor was not *nobody*. Imprisoning him could trigger a new conflict.

Yet the prison held somebody.

The sweet taste of milk had soured in her mouth, but Kestrel smiled as she stood. "Let's go."

The capital prison was outside the palace walls, situated a little lower on the mountain, on the other side of the city, in a natural sinkhole that was expanded and fortified and spiraled with seemingly endless descending staircases. It was small—the prison of the eastern empire was rumored to be as large as an underground city—but its size suited the Valorian emperor well. Most criminals were shipped to a labor camp in the mines of the frozen north. Those that were left behind were the very worst, and soon executed.

Oil lamps were lit, and the captain led Kestrel down the first black, airless stairwell. The trailing fabric of her dress hissed behind her. It was hard not to imagine that she was a prisoner being led to her cell. Kestrel's heartbeat tricked her; it fumbled at the thought of being caught at some crime, of being locked up in the dark.

They passed a cell. Fingers curled like white worms through the bars of the cell's small window. A voice rasped something in a language Kestrel didn't recognize. It had a lisping quality she couldn't place until she realized that this must be the sound of someone who had no teeth. She shrank back.

"Keep away from the bars," said the captain. "This way," he added, as if there were any way but down.

When the staircase finally ran out of steps, it threw Kestrel off balance to stand on unstaggered ground. The corridor smelled like wet rock and sewage.

The captain opened a cell and ushered Kestrel inside. For a moment she hesitated, instantly and wildly sure that he meant to trap her here. Her hand went to the dagger at her hip.

The captain chuckled. The sound triggered a metallic rattle in the corner of the cell, and the captain lifted his lamp to illuminate a sitting man who strained at chains embedded in the wall. His bare heels scrubbed the uneven floor as he tried to push back, away from the captain.

"Don't worry," the captain said to Kestrel. "He's harmless. Here." He passed her the lamp, then dragged on a

loose end of chain to draw the prisoner tight against the wall. The man shuddered and wept. He began to pray to all hundred of the Herrani gods.

She didn't recognize him. A relief. Then came a clammy shame. What did it matter if she knew him or not? The prisoner was going to suffer. She could see his suffering written in the captain's lamplit eyes.

Kestrel would not stay. She could not watch. She turned toward the door.

"That's against the emperor's rules," the captain told her. "He said that you have to be here for the whole of it. He said that if you became uncooperative, I should cut off this man's fingers instead of his skin."

The prisoner's prayer halted. Shakily, it started up again.

Kestrel felt like that thin, keening voice. Like the sound of a gear cranked tight and then let go. "I don't belong here," she said.

"You're my future empress," said the captain. "You do. Or did you think that ruling meant only dresses and dances?" He checked that the chain was taut. The man hung from his bonds. "The lamp, my lady." The captain beckoned her closer.

The prisoner lifted his head. Lamplight flared on his eyes, and even though Kestrel knew that this broken man wasn't Arin—the prisoner was too old, his features too delicate—her heart seized. They were ordinary eyes for a Herrani. But gray and clear, just like Arin's. And it suddenly seemed that Arin was the one stumbling over the

name of the god of mercy, that *he* was begging her for something she had no idea how to give.

“The *lamp*,” the captain said again. “Are you going to be difficult so soon, Lady Kestrel?”

She came forward. She saw, then, the outline of a bucket near the prisoner, filled to the brim with feces and urine, and that the man’s right hand was a padded mitten of gauze.

The captain stripped it off. The prisoner choked on his prayer.

The skin on three fingers was missing.

Kestrel caught a glimpse of pink muscle and creamy, glistening bands of tendon. Her stomach heaved. The captain pulled a small table from a dark corner of the cell and flattened the man’s hand across it, palm up.

“What is your name?” the captain asked him. When there was no answer, the Valorian drew his dagger and cut into the prisoner’s fourth finger. Blood fountained up.

“Stop,” Kestrel begged. “Stop this.”

The prisoner thrashed, but was pinioned by the wrist. The captain raised his dagger again.

Kestrel caught his arm. Her fingers dug in, and the captain’s face seemed to open—almost greedily, with a shine that said that he had awaited her failure. That’s what this was. Kestrel had been failing the emperor’s test even without knowing its criteria. Every hesitation was a black mark against her. Each ounce of her pity was being tallied by the captain, hoarded to be tipped out later before the emperor, spilled before him to say, *Look what a*

pathetic girl she is. How weak of will. She has no stomach to rule.

She didn't. Not if this was what ruling an empire meant.

She wasn't sure what she would have done next if the prisoner hadn't gone still. He was staring at Kestrel. His eyes were wide, streaming. Stunned. He recognized her. She didn't know him. The urgency of his expression, however, was that of someone who has found a familiar key to a box he is desperate to unlock.

"My name is Thrynne," he whispered to her in Herrani. "Tell him that I—"

The captain shook off Kestrel's slackened grip and rounded on the prisoner. "You'll tell me yourself." The captain spoke Herrani with heavily accented fluency. "It's good that you're ready to talk. Now, Thrynne. What were you saying? Tell me *what*?"

The prisoner's mouth worked soundlessly. Blood welled across the table. The captain's blade gleamed.

Kestrel was calm now. It was the way the prisoner was looking at her—as if she were a stroke of good fortune. She couldn't betray that, even if she didn't understand it. She would make herself capable. She would handle whatever his expression was asking her to handle.

"I don't remember," Thrynne said.

"Tell me or I'll strip you bare."

"Captain," said Kestrel. "He's confused. Give him a moment—"

"*You* are confused if you think to interfere with my

interrogation. You're here to listen. Thrynne, I asked you a question. Stop looking at her. She isn't important. I am."

Thrynne's gaze jumped between them. He made a guttural sound, urgent and rough, with the slight whine of tamped-down pain. He focused on Kestrel. "Please," he said hoarsely, "he needs to know."

The captain peeled off a piece of skin and flicked it into the bucket.

Thrynne screamed. The scream broken by sucked breaths, it rang through Kestrel's head.

She reached for the captain. She tried to snag the hand that held his blade. He shoved her back easily, without even looking, and she fell.

"Don't refuse *me*, Thrynne," said the captain. "'No' doesn't exist anymore. Only 'yes.' Do you understand?"

The scream was bitten off. "Yes."

Kestrel got to her feet. "Captain—"

"Quiet. You're only making this worse." To Thrynne he said, "What were you doing eavesdropping outside the doors of a private meeting between the emperor and the Senate leader?"

"Nothing! Cleaning. I clean."

"That sounds like a 'no' to me."

"No! I mean, yes, yes, I was sweeping the floor. I clean. I'm a servant."

"You're a slave," the captain corrected, though the emperor had issued a decree that emancipated the Herrani. "Aren't you?"

"Yes. I am."

Kestrel had quietly drawn her dagger. If the captain kept his back to her, she might be able to do something. It didn't matter that her combat skills were pitiful. She could stop him.

Maybe.

"And why," the captain said to Thrynne in a gentle voice, "why were you listening outside that door?"

The dagger in Kestrel's hand shook. She smelled the emperor's perfumed oil on the captain. She forced herself close. The breakfast milk swam up her throat.

Thrynne tore his gaze from the captain to glance at her. "Money," he said. "This is the year of money."

"Ah," said the captain. "Now we come to it. You were paid to listen, weren't you?"

"No—"

The captain's knife came down. Kestrel vomited, her dagger falling into the shadows. The sound of it hitting stone was lost in Thrynne's shriek. She wiped her mouth on her sleeve; she was not looking, she was pressing hands to her ears. She barely heard the captain say, "Who? *Who* paid you?"

But there was no answer. Thrynne had fainted.

Kestrel took to her rooms like someone sick. Infected. She bathed until she felt boiled. She left her ruined dress where it lay, balled up on the bathing room floor. Then she climbed into bed, hair loose and damp, and thought.

Or tried to think. She tried to think about what she

should do. Then she noticed that the feather blanket, thick yet light, quivered like a living thing. She was shaking.

She remembered Cheat, the Herrani leader. Arin had answered to him, followed him. Loved him. Yes, she knew that Arin had loved him.

Cheat had always threatened Kestrel's hands. To break them, cut off fingers, crush them with his own. He had seemed obsessed with them, until he became obsessed with her in a different way. She felt it again: that cold roll of horror as she began to understand what he wanted and what he would do to get it.

He was dead now. Arin had gutted him. Kestrel had seen it. She'd seen Cheat die, and she reassured herself that he could not hurt her. Kestrel stared at her hands, whole and undamaged. They were not peeled and bloody meat. They were slim, nails kept short for the piano. Skin soft. A small birthmark near the base of the thumb.

Her hands were pretty, she supposed. Spread against the blanket, they seemed the height of uselessness.

What could she do?

Help the prisoner escape? That would require a strategy hinged upon enlisting the help of others. Kestrel didn't have enough leverage over the captain. No one in the capital owed her favors. She didn't know the court's secrets. She was new to the palace and had no one's loyalty here, not for help with such an insane plan.

And if she were caught? What would the emperor do to *her*?

And if she did nothing?

She couldn't do nothing. Having done nothing in the prison had already cost too much.

This is the year of money, Thrynne had said. He had spoken the words as if they were meant for her. It was an odd phrase. Yet familiar. Perhaps it was as the captain had assumed: Thrynne was revealing that he had been paid to gather information. The emperor had many enemies, not all of them foreign. A rival in the Senate might have employed Thrynne.

But as the feather blanket stilled, transforming into a peaked field of snow over Kestrel's tucked-in knees, she remembered her Herrani nurse saying, "This is the year of stars."

Kestrel had been little. Enai was tending to her skinned knee. Kestrel hadn't been a clumsy girl, but she had always tried too hard, with predictable bruised and bloodied results. "Be careful," Enai had said, wrapping the gauze. "This is the year of stars."

It had seemed such a curious thing to say. Kestrel had asked for an explanation. "You Valorians mark the years by numbers," Enai had said, "but we mark them by our gods. We cycle through the pantheon, one god of the hundred for each year. The god of stars rules this year, so you must mind your feet and gaze. This god loves accidents. Beauty, too. Sometimes when the god is vexed or simply bored, she decides that the most beautiful thing is disaster."

Kestrel should have found this silly. Valorians had no gods. There was no afterlife, or any of the other Herrani superstitions. If the Valorians worshipped anything, it

was glory. Kestrel's father laughed at the idea of fate. He was the imperial general; if he had believed in fate, he said, he would have sat in his tent and waited for the country of Herran to be handed to him in a pretty crystal cup. Instead he'd seized it. His victories, he said, were his own.

But as a child, Kestrel had been charmed by the idea of gods. They made for good stories. She had asked Enai to teach her the names of the hundred and what they ruled. One evening at dinner, when her father cracked a fragile dish under his knife, she'd said jokingly, "Careful, Father. This is the year of stars." He had gone still. Kestrel became frightened. Maybe the gods were real after all. This moment was a disaster. She saw disaster in her father's furious eyes. She saw it on Enai's arm the next day, in the form of a bruise: a purple, broad bracelet made by a large hand.

Kestrel stopped asking about the gods. She forgot them. Probably there was a god of money. Perhaps this was the year. She wasn't sure. She didn't understand what the phrase had meant to Thrynne.

Tell him, Thrynne had said. *He needs to know*. The captain had assumed that Thrynne had meant himself. Maybe that was it. But Kestrel recalled the prisoner's gray eyes and how he'd appeared to know her. Of course, he was a servant in the palace. Servants knew who she was without her knowing all their names or faces. But he was Herrani.

Say that he was new to the palace. Say that he recognized her from her life in Herran, when everything had

been a series of dinners and dances and teas, when her greatest worry was how to navigate her father's desire for her to join the military, and his hatred of her music.

Or maybe Thrynne recognized her from when everything had changed. After the Firstwinter Rebellion. When the Herrani had seized the capital and Arin had claimed her for his own.

He needs to know, Thrynne had said.

Slowly, as if moving tiny parts of a dangerous machine, Kestrel substituted one word with a name.

Arin needs to know.

But know what?

Kestrel had questions of her own for Thrynne. She would seek a way to help him, and to understand what he had said—but this meant seeing Thrynne alone . . . and *that* required the permission of the emperor.

"I'm ashamed of myself," she told the emperor the next morning. They were in his private treasury. His note accepting her request to see him, and naming this room for the meeting, seemed to have been made with good grace. But he was silent now, inspecting a drawer pulled out of a wall honeycombed from floor to ceiling with them. He was intent on the drawer's contents, which Kestrel couldn't see.

"I behaved badly in the prison," Kestrel said. "The torture—"

"Interrogation," he said to the drawer.

"It reminded me of the Firstwinter Rebellion. Of . . . what I experienced."

“What you experienced.” The emperor looked up from the drawer.

“Yes.”

“We have never fully discussed what you experienced, Kestrel. I should think that whatever it was, it would make you encourage the captain in his proceedings instead of jeopardizing his line of inquiry. Or do we have a different understanding of what you suffered at the hands of the Herrani rebels? Do I need to reevaluate the story of the general’s daughter, who escaped captivity and sailed through a storm to alert me to the rebellion?”

“No.”

“Do you think that an empire can survive without a few dirty methods? Do you think that an empress will keep herself clean of them?”

“No.”

He slid the drawer shut. Its click was as loud as a bang. “Then what have we left to address but my disappointment? My grievous disappointment? I had thought better of you.”

“Let me redeem myself. Please. I speak Herrani very well, and my presence made the prisoner ready to talk. If I were to question him—”

“He’s dead.”

“What?”

“Dead, and whatever information he had with him.”

“How?”

The emperor waved an irritated hand. “Infection. Fever. A waste bucket.”

"I don't understand."

"The prison is designed to prevent suicide. But this man—Thrynne—was clever. Committed. Desperate. Any number of qualities that might make someone decide to inflict open wounds by plunging them into a waste bucket."

Kestrel's nausea threatened to return. And guilt: a bad taste at the back of her throat.

The emperor sighed. He settled into a chair and gestured for Kestrel to sit in the one across from him. She sank into it. "You know his kind, Kestrel. Do you think that someone like him would resort to such measures to protect a Valorian senator who had paid him to learn which ways he should vote?"

"No," she said. Any other answer would seem false.

"Who do you think hired him?"

"The east, perhaps. They must have spies among us."

"Oh, they do." The emperor held her gaze in a way that didn't wait for an answer, but to see if she would voice what he already believed.

"He worked for Herran," Kestrel said slowly.

"Of course. Tell me, is their leader an inspiring sort of man? I've never met him. But you were his prisoner. Would you say that this new governor has . . . charisma? The sort of pull and power that lure people to take extreme risks on his behalf?"

She swallowed hard. "Yes."

"I have something to show you." He pointed at the drawer he had closed. "Bring what lies inside."

It was a gold coin stamped with the emperor's profile.

"I had this series minted in celebration of your engagement," he said. "Turn the coin over."

Kestrel did. What she saw left her frightened. It was a symbol of crossed knitting needles.

"Do you know what that is?"

Kestrel hesitated to speak. "It's the sign of Jadis."

"Yes. The perfect story, I think, to represent you."

Jadis had been a warrior girl from ancient Valorian legend. A lieutenant. Her army had been defeated, and she was taken prisoner by an enemy warlord who added her to his harem. He liked all his women, but developed a particular taste for the Valorian girl. He was not, however, stupid. He summoned her to his bed naked, so that she had no chance to hide a weapon. And he had her bound as well, at least at first. He didn't trust her hands.

But Jadis was sweet and easy, and as time passed and the warlord's camp traveled, he noticed that she had become friends with the other women in his harem. They taught her how to knit. Sometimes, when not at battle, he saw her outside the women's tent, knitting something shapeless. It amused him to know that the reputation of Valorian ferocity was nothing more than myth. How domestic was his little warrior!

"What's that?" he asked.

"It's for you," Jadis said. "You'll like it, you'll see."

The woolly thing grew over the months. It became a private joke between them. He would ask if it was meant to be a sock, a tunic, a cloak. Her answer was always the same: "You'll like it, you'll see."

One night, in the warlord's tent, long after he'd stopped

ordering her hands to be bound, he gazed upon her. "Do you know which battle comes tomorrow?"

"Yes," Jadis said. The warlord planned to strike at the heart of Valoria. He would likely succeed.

"You must hate me for it."

"No."

The word brought tears to his eyes. He wanted to weep against her skin. He did not believe her.

"My love," she said, "I have almost finished your present. Let me knit it here beside you. It will bring you luck in battle."

That made him laugh, for he couldn't possibly imagine how she expected him to wear that ugly, lumpy mass of wool. He was cheered as he remembered how dedicated she was to her hapless knitting. So what if she had no skill for it? It was proof of her devotion to him.

He went to the tent's opening and called for her knitting basket.

He set it beside the bed and enjoyed her again. Afterward, she knitted beside him. The warlord was made sleepy by the needles' quiet chatter. "Aren't you finished yet?" he teased.

"Yes. Just now I've finished."

"But what *is* it?"

"Don't you see? Don't you like it? Look closely, my love."

He did, and Jadis stabbed her needles into his throat.

The coin lay heavy on Kestrel's palm. All the breath had gone out of her.

The emperor said, "We were talking earlier about your captivity under Arin."

“It wasn’t like this.” She tightened her fingers around the coin. “I’m no Jadis.”

“No? The governor, I hear, is an attractive man.”

“I didn’t think so.” She hadn’t, not at first. How miserable that she hadn’t seen Arin for what he was, how worse when she did understand it, and how perfectly awful now, when he was lost to her and the emperor was asking for her secrets. “He was never my lover. Never.”

That much was true. The sound of her voice must have convinced the emperor, or the way she clutched the coin. His response came gently: “I believe you. But what if I didn’t? Would it matter if the slave had shared your bed? Oh, Kestrel. Don’t look at me with such shock. Do you think that I’m a prude? I’ve heard the rumors. Everyone has.” He stood, and came near to tap the fist she had closed around the coin. “That’s why you need Jadis. This is a gift. If the capital thinks you favored the governor of Herran, let them think that it was for a purpose.

“You made a choice when you stood before me and pleaded for Herrani independence. You chose my son. You chose my cause.” He shrugged. “I’m a pragmatist. I had no desire to mire myself in a battle with Herran when the east beckons. Your solution—Herran’s new status as an independent territory of the empire—has been politically costly in some ways . . . but valuable in others. And militarily necessary. An added benefit? The military loves me now that its general’s daughter will marry my son.

“I think we understand each other, don’t we? I get a daughter intelligent enough to manage the empire one day,

and in the meanwhile I can count on the goodwill of her father's soldiers. You get a crown and absolution from any past . . . indiscretions."

Kestrel lowered her hand, fist loose, but not loose enough to let the coin slip.

"Your dagger, please, Kestrel." He held out his palm.

"What?"

"Give me your dagger." When she still didn't move, he said. "It's too plain. My son's bride must have something finer."

"My father gave it to me."

"Won't I be your father, too?"

The emperor had just made it impossible for Kestrel to refuse without offending him. She drew the dagger, which she cherished. She pressed her thumb once against the ruby set into the dagger's hilt and carved with her seal: the talons of a bird of prey. She pressed hard enough for it to hurt. Then she gave her weapon to the emperor.

He placed it in the drawer that had held the coin and pushed it shut. He regarded Kestrel, his own dagger gleaming at his hip. He touched the golden line on her brow that marked her as an engaged woman. "I have your loyalty to the empire, don't I?"

"Of course." She tried to ignore the weightlessness of her scabbard.

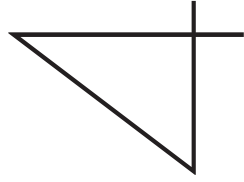
"Good. And what's past is past, isn't it?"

"Yes."

The emperor seemed satisfied. "There will be no hint of any sympathy you might have toward Herran—or its

governor. If you have any, rub it out. If you don't, you won't like the consequences. Do you understand?"

She did. Kestrel saw now that the emperor hadn't intended her visit to the prison to be a mere test or lesson. It had been a warning of what came to those who crossed him.



KESTREL CARRIED THE JADIS COIN WITH HER everywhere. It was in her pocket on the day she surprised the prince in her music room.

She was drawn up short by the sight of Prince Verex sitting at a table set with the pieces of an eastern game. He glanced at her, then down at the marble pieces. A blush seeped into his cheeks. He toyed with a miniature cannon.

“Borderlands is a game meant to be played by two opponents,” Kestrel said. “Are you waiting for me?”

“No.” He dropped the gaming piece and shoved his hands under his arms. “Why would I be?”

“Well, this is my room.”

Within her first days in the palace, the emperor had given Kestrel a new piano and had had it installed here in the imperial wing, saying that this room’s acoustics were excellent. This wasn’t true. The room echoed too much. It sounded larger than it really was. Its stone walls were bare, the furniture stiff. Shelves were sparsely decorated with

objects that had nothing to do with music: astrolabes, gaming sets, a clay soldier, collapsed telescopes.

“Your room,” Verex repeated. “I suppose everything in the palace is here for your taking. My father is giving you the empire. You might as well have my old playroom, too.” His shrug was tight-shouldered.

Kestrel’s gaze fell again on the clay soldier. She saw its chipped paint, its place of prestige in the center of a shelf. The room was a cold, uninviting place for any child. She recalled that Verex, too, had lost his mother at an early age.

Kestrel went to sit across from him. “Your father didn’t *give* me this room,” she said. “He probably hoped we would share this space and spend more time with each other.”

“You don’t really believe that.”

“But here we are together.”

“You’re not supposed to be here. I paid one of your ladies-in-waiting. She told me you planned to spend the afternoon in the library.”

“One of my servants reports to *you*?”

“It seems that the general’s daughter, despite her reputation for being so very clever, thinks she’s immune to all the petty espionage a court is capable of. Not really that smart, is she?”

“Certainly smarter than someone who decides to reveal that he has her maid in his employ. Why don’t you tell me which maid, Verex, and make your mistake complete?”

For a moment, she thought he’d overturn the table and send the Borderlands pieces flying. She realized then what

he'd been doing as he sat alone in front of the Borderlands set, a game that was the rage at court. The pieces were organized in a beginner's pattern. Verex had been practicing.

It seemed that the hurt lines of his expression spoke in the clearest of words.

"You hate me," Kestrel said.

He sagged in his chair. His messy, fair hair fell forward, and he rubbed his eyes like someone woken too early. "No, I really don't. I hate *this*." He waved a hand around the room. "I hate that you're using me to get the crown. I hate that my father thinks it's a brilliant idea."

Kestrel touched a piece from the Borderlands game. It was a scout. "You could tell him that you don't wish to marry me."

"Oh, I have."

"Maybe neither of us has much choice in the matter." She saw his swift curiosity and regretted her words. She moved the Borderlands scout closer to the general. "I like this game. It makes me think that the eastern empire appreciates a good story as well as a battle."

He gave her a look that noted a sharp change in subject, but said only, "Borderlands is a game, not a book."

"Borderlands could be *like* a book, if one had constantly shifting possibilities for different endings, and for the way characters can veer off course into the unexpected. Borderlands is tricky, too. It tempts a player into thinking she knows the story of her opponent. Take the story of the inexperienced player. The beginner who doesn't see traps being set." Verex's expression had grown softer, so Kestrel arranged the Borderlands pieces into an opening gambit

and moved them into different patterns of play for two opponents, explaining how a perceived beginner might win a game by deliberately falling for a trap in order to set one of his own. When the green general finally toppled the red, Kestrel said, “We could practice together.”

Verex’s large eyes were suddenly too shiny. “By ‘practice,’ you mean ‘teach.’”

“Friends play games together all the time without thinking of it as practicing or teaching or winning or losing.”

“Friends.”

“I don’t have many.” She had one. She missed Jess terribly. Jess had gone to the southern isles with her family for her health. In the past, Jess would have gone to a charming little house her family owned by the sea on the warm southern tip of Herran, but the Midwinter Edict ordered Valorian colonists to surrender all property in Herran. The colonists were compensated by the emperor, and Jess’s parents had purchased a new house in the islands. But Kestrel read the homesickness in Jess’s letters. Kestrel wrote back. They wrote often, but letters weren’t enough.

Verex nudged the fallen red general with his green one, listening to the rocking tap of marble on marble. “Maybe we could be friends, if you could explain why *you* don’t tell my father that you don’t wish to marry me.”

But Kestrel couldn’t explain.

“You don’t want *me*,” Verex said.

She couldn’t lie.

“You claimed that you don’t have a choice,” he said.

“What did you mean?”

“Nothing. Truly, I want to marry you.”

His anger returned. "Then let's list the reasons." He ticked them off on his fingers. "You seek the empire, and a husband you can manipulate as easily as these game pieces."

"No," she said, but why wouldn't Verex believe his portrait of her: power-hungry, unfeeling? It was what Arin believed.

"You want a good laugh. So that at our engagement ball you can watch me lose at Borderlands while every single aristocrat and governor of the territories laughs with you."

"A ball? All the governors? Are you sure? No one's told me about this."

"My father tells you *everything*."

"He didn't. I swear, I knew nothing of a ball."

"So he plays games with you, too. My father is two-faced, Kestrel. If you think he adores you, you'd better think again."

Kestrel threw up her hands. "You're impossible. You can't blame me for his favor *and* claim that I'm no more than an amusing toy to him." She stood and went toward the door, for she saw that the brief peace between them had disintegrated, and her mind was reeling. An engagement ball. With all the governors. Arin was coming. Arin would be here.

"I wonder why my father didn't tell you," Verex said. "Could it be so that in catching you off guard, he could observe exactly what lies between you and the new governor of Herran?"

Kestrel stopped, turned. "There is *nothing* between us."

"I've seen the Jadis coin. I've heard the rumors. Before

the rebellion, he was your favorite slave. You fought a duel for him.”

She almost reached out to a bookshelf to steady herself. It felt as if she might fall.

“I know why you’re marrying me, Kestrel. It’s so that everyone will forget that after the rebellion, no one put *you* in a prison, not like every other Valorian in Herran’s city. You were special, weren’t you? Because you were *his*. Everyone knows what you were.”

Her vertigo vanished. She snatched the clay soldier off the shelf.

She saw instantly from Verex’s expression that she held something he cherished. She would smash it, she would smash it against the floor. She would break Verex like his father had broken him.

Like she had broken her own heart. Kestrel felt the pieces of her heart suddenly, as if love had been an object, something as frail as a bird’s egg, its shell an impossible cloudy pink. She saw the shock of its bloody yolk. She felt the shards of shell pricking her throat and lungs.

Kestrel set the soldier back on the shelf. She made certain her voice was clear when she spoke her last words before leaving the room. “If you won’t be my friend, you’ll regret being my enemy.”

Kestrel retreated to her suite and sent her maids away. She didn’t trust any of them now. She sat by a tiny window that gave a feeble light. When she took the Jadis coin from her pocket, it looked dull on her palm.

This is the year of money, she remembered. She had indeed planned on going to the library earlier today, as her maid had informed Verex. She'd hoped to research the Herrani gods, then thought better of it. The library possessed a paltry collection of books; it was mostly a glamorous room where courtiers sometimes met for a quiet tea, or where a military officer might consult one of the thousands of maps. The library would have suited Kestrel well if she had wanted to find a map or to socialize . . . or if she'd wanted members of the court to see her researching Herrani books.

She had turned away from the thick library doors.

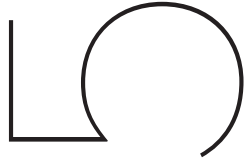
Now she huddled in her velvet chair, trying to concentrate on the actual words of her conversation with Verex instead of on their emotional undertow. She flipped the coin, flipped it again. Emperor. Jadis. Emperor. Jadis. *He's two-faced*, Verex had said of his father. Kestrel thought about that phrase as she considered each side of the coin. *Two-faced*: the word dangled a hook into the dark well of her memory. It snagged on something.

The Herrani believed that a god ruled not just one thing, but a whole domain of associated ideas, actions, objects. The god of stars was the god of stars, yes, but also of accidents, beauty, and disasters. The god of souls . . . Kestrel's throat closed as she remembered Arin invoking that god, who ruled love. *My soul is yours*, he had said. *You know that it is*. His expression had been so open, so true. Frightened, even, of what he was saying. And she had been frightened, too, by how he had spoken what she felt. It frightened her still.

The coin. Kestrel forced her attention again to the coin.

There was nothing honest about the god of money. She recalled that now. This god was two-faced, like this piece of gold. Sometimes male, sometimes female. *He rules buying and selling*, Enai had said, *which means she rules negotiation. And hidden things. You can't see both sides of one coin at once, can you, child? The god of money always keeps a secret.*

The god of money was also the god of spies.



ARIN REMEMBERED.

It had been easy at first, the promise to be Cheat's spy. "I trust you most," the leader of the rebellion had murmured in Arin's ear after his sale to the general's daughter. "You are my second-in-command, lad, and between you and me we will have the Valorians on their knees."

Everything had slid and locked into place along well-oiled grooves.

Except . . .

Except.

The general's daughter had taken an interest in Arin. It was a gods-given opportunity, yet even in those early days as her slave, Arin had had the misgiving—uncomfortable, low, electric, like sparks rubbed off clothes in winter—that her interest would lead to his undoing.

And Arin was Arin: he pushed his luck, as he always did.

His habit was worse with her. He said things he

shouldn't. He broke rules, and she watched him do it, and said little of the breaking.

It was, he decided, because she didn't care what he did.

Then came an impulse whose danger he should have seen—*would* have seen, if he had been able to admit to himself what it was that made him want to shake her awake even though her eyes were open.

Why should she care what a slave did?

Arin would *make* her care.

Arin remembered.

How he couldn't sleep at night in the slaves' quarters for the music that needled its way through the dark, across the general's grounds from the villa, where the girl played and played and didn't care that he was tired, because she didn't know that he was tired, because she gave no thought to him at all.

He was whipped barebacked by her Valorian steward for some slight offense. The next day she had ordered him to escort her to a tea party. Pride had kept him from wincing as he moved. The fiery stripes on his back split and bled. She wouldn't see, he would not let her see, he would not give her the satisfaction.

Nonetheless, he searched for a sign that she'd even heard of the flogging. His gaze raked her face, finding nothing there but a discomfort to be so scrutinized.

She didn't know. He was certain he would have been able to tell. Guilt was an emotion she was bad at hiding.

Across the distance, where she was sitting on a brocade divan, teacup and saucer in hand, she dropped his gaze, turned to a lord, and laughed at something he had said.

Her innocence was maddening.

She should know. She should know what her steward had done. She should know it to be her fault whether she'd given the order or not—and whether she knew or not. Innocent? Her? Never.

He pulled the high collar of his shirt higher to hide a lash that had snaked up his neck.

He did not want her to know.

He did not want her to see.

But:

Look at me, he found himself thinking furiously at her.
Look at me.

She lifted her eyes, and did.

The memories were strange, they were a network of lashes, laid one on top of the other, burning traces that might have resembled a pattern if it wasn't clear that they had been left by a wild hand with no restraint. The lashes were lit with feeling.

He was stinging, stinging.

"Arin," Tensen said during their meeting with the Her-rani treasurer, who was even grimmer than usual, "where is your head? You've heard nothing I've said."

"Say it again."

“The emperor has had a new coin minted to celebrate the engagement.”

Arin didn’t want to hear about the engagement.

“I think that you should see it,” Tensen said.

Arin took the coin, and didn’t see whatever it was that Tensen thought he should see.

Tensen told him the story of Jadis.

Arin dropped the coin.

He remembered.

He remembered changing.

He saw Kestrel give a flower to a baby everyone else ignored. He watched her lose cheerfully at cards to an old Valorian woman whom society giggled about, not even bothering to hush their words, for she was too senile, they said, to understand.

Arin had stood behind Kestrel during that card game. He’d seen her high hand.

He saw her honesty with him. She offered it like a cup of clear water that he drank deep.

Her tears, glinting in the dark.

Her fierce creature of a mind: sleek and sharp-clawed and utterly unwilling to be caught.

Arin saw Kestrel step between him and punishment as if it meant nothing, instead of everything.

“Arin?” Tensen called through the memories.

Arin remembered the sunken days after he’d seen her last, after she’d handed him her emperor’s decree of Her-rani freedom and told him about her engagement. “Congratulate me,” she’d said. He hadn’t believed it. He had begged. She hadn’t listened. “Oh, Arin,” Sarsine said to him during

the time when he wouldn't leave the rooms Kestrel had lived in. "What did you expect?"

Grief. It had all come to this.

"Arin," Tensen said to him again, and Arin could no longer ignore him. "For the last time, are you going to the capital or not?"