



SHE SHOULDN'T HAVE BEEN TEMPTED.

This is what Kestrel thought as she swept the sailors' silver off the impromptu gaming table set up in a corner of the market.

"Don't go," said one sailor.

"Stay," said another, but Kestrel cinched her wrist-strap velvet purse shut. The sun had lowered, and caramelized the color of things, which meant that she had played cards long enough to be noticed by someone who mattered.

Someone who would tell her father.

Cards wasn't even her favorite game. The silver wouldn't begin to pay for her silk dress, snagged from the splintery crate she had used as a stool. But sailors were much better adversaries than the average aristocrat. They flipped cards with feral tricks, swore when they lost, swore when they won, would gouge the last silver keystone coin out of a friend. And they cheated. Kestrel especially liked it when they cheated. It made beating them not quite so easy.

She smiled and left them. Then her smile faded. This

hour of thrilling risk was going to cost her. It wasn't the gambling that would infuriate her father, or the company she had kept. No, General Trajan was going to want to know why his daughter was in the city market alone.

Other people wondered, too. She saw it in their eyes as she threaded through market stalls offering open sacks of spice, the scents mingling with salty air that wafted from the nearby port. Kestrel guessed the words people didn't dare whisper as she passed. Of course they didn't speak. They knew who she was. And she knew what they would say.

Where was Lady Kestrel's escort?

And if she had no friend or family available to escort her to the market, where was her slave?

Well, as for a slave, they had been left at her villa. Kestrel did not need them.

As for the whereabouts of her escort, she was wondering the same thing.

Jess had wandered off to look at the wares. Kestrel last saw her weaving like a flower-drunk bee through the stalls, her pale blond hair almost white in the summer sun. Technically, Jess could get in as much trouble as Kestrel. It wasn't allowed for a young Valorian girl who wasn't a member of the military to walk alone. But Jess's parents doted on her, and they hardly had the same notion of discipline as the highest-ranking general in the Valorian army.

Kestrel scanned the stalls for her friend, and finally caught the gleam of blond braids styled in the latest fashion. Jess was talking to a jewelry seller who dangled a pair of earrings. The translucent gold droplets caught the light.

Kestrel drew closer.

“Topaz,” the elderly woman was saying to Jess. “To brighten your lovely brown eyes. Only ten keystones.”

There was a hard set to the jewelry seller’s mouth. Kestrel met the woman’s gray eyes and noticed that her wrinkled skin was browned from years of working outdoors. She was Herrani, but a brand on her wrist proved that she was free. Kestrel wondered how she had earned that freedom. Slaves freed by their masters were rare.

Jess glanced up. “Oh, Kestrel,” she breathed. “Aren’t these earrings perfect?”

Maybe if the weight of silver in Kestrel’s purse hadn’t dragged at her wrist she would have said nothing. Maybe if that drag at her wrist hadn’t also dragged at her heart with dread, Kestrel would have thought before she spoke. But instead she blurted what was the obvious truth. “They’re not topaz. They’re glass.”

There was a sudden bubble of silence. It expanded, grew thin and sheer. People around them were listening. The earrings trembled in midair.

Because the jewelry seller’s bony fingers were trembling.

Because Kestrel had just accused her of trying to cheat a Valorian.

And what would happen next? What would happen to any Herrani in this woman’s position? What would the crowd witness?

An officer of the city guard called to the scene. A plea of innocence, ignored. Old hands bound to the whipping post. Lashes until blood darkened the market dirt.

“Let me see,” Kestrel said, her voice imperious, because she was very good at being imperious. She reached for the

earrings and pretended to examine them. “Ah. It seems I was mistaken. Indeed they *are* topaz.”

“Take them,” whispered the jewelry seller.

“We are not poor. We have no need of a gift from someone such as you.” Kestrel set coins on the woman’s table. The bubble of silence broke, and shoppers returned to discussing whatever ware had caught their fancy.

Kestrel gave the earrings to Jess and led her away.

As they walked, Jess studied one earring, letting it swing like a tiny bell. “So they *are* real?”

“No.”

“How can you tell?”

“They’re completely unclouded,” Kestrel said. “No flaws. Ten keystones was too cheap a price for topaz of that quality.”

Jess might have commented that ten keystones was too great a price for glass. But she said only, “The Herrani would say that the god of lies must love you, you see things so clearly.”

Kestrel remembered the woman’s stricken gray eyes. “The Herrani tell too many stories.” They had been dreamers. Her father always said that this was why they had been easy to conquer.

“Everyone loves stories,” Jess said.

Kestrel stopped to take the earrings from Jess and slip them into her friend’s ears. “Then wear these to the next society dinner. Tell everyone you paid an outrageous sum, and they will believe they’re true jewels. Isn’t that what stories do, make real things fake, and fake things real?”

Jess smiled, turning her head from side to side so that the earrings glittered. “Well? Am I beautiful?”

“Silly. You know you are.”

Jess led the way now, slipping past a table with brass bowls holding powdered dye. "It's my turn to buy something for you," she said.

"I have everything I need."

"You sound like an old woman! One would think you're seventy, not seventeen."

The crowd was thicker now, filled with the golden features of Valorians, hair and skin and eyes ranging from honey tones to light brown. The occasional dark heads belonged to well-dressed house slaves, who had come with their masters and stayed close to their sides.

"Don't look so troubled," Jess said. "Come, I will find something to make you happy. A bracelet?"

But that reminded Kestrel of the jewelry seller. "We should go home."

"Sheet music?"

Kestrel hesitated.

"Aha," said Jess. She seized Kestrel's hand. "Don't let go."

This was an old game. Kestrel closed her eyes and was tugged blindly after Jess, who laughed, and then Kestrel laughed, too, as she had years ago when they first met.

The general had been impatient with his daughter's mourning. "Your mother's been dead half a year," he had said. "That is long enough." Finally, he had had a senator in a nearby villa bring his daughter, also eight years old, to visit. The men went inside Kestrel's house. The girls were told to stay outside. "Play," the general had ordered.

Jess had chattered at Kestrel, who ignored her. Finally, Jess stopped. "Close your eyes," she said.

Curious, Kestrel did.

Jess had grabbed her hand. “Don’t let go!” They tore over the general’s grassy grounds, slipping and tumbling and laughing.

It was like that now, except for the press of people around them.

Jess slowed. Then she stopped and said, “Oh.”

Kestrel opened her eyes.

The girls had come to a waist-high wooden barrier that overlooked a pit below. “You brought me *here*?”

“I didn’t mean to,” said Jess. “I got distracted by a woman’s hat—did *you* know hats are in fashion?—and was following to get a better look, and . . .”

“And brought us to the slave market.” The crowd had congealed behind them, noisy with restless anticipation. There would be an auction soon.

Kestrel stepped back. She heard a smothered oath when her heel met someone’s toes.

“We’ll never get out now,” Jess said. “We might as well stay until the auction’s over.”

Hundreds of Valorians were gathered before the barrier, which curved in a wide semicircle. Everyone in the crowd was dressed in silks, each with a dagger strapped to the hip, though some—like Jess—wore it more as an ornamental toy than a weapon.

The pit below was empty, save for a large wooden auction block.

“At least we have a good view.” Jess shrugged.

Kestrel knew that Jess understood why her friend had claimed loudly that the glass earrings were topaz. Jess understood why they had been purchased. But the girl’s shrug

reminded Kestrel that there were certain things they couldn't discuss.

"Ah," said a pointy-chinned woman at Kestrel's side. "At last." Her eyes narrowed on the pit and the stocky man walking into its center. He was Herrani, with the typical black hair, though his skin was pale from an easy life, no doubt due to the same favoritism that had gotten him this job. This was someone who had learned how to please his Valorian conquerors.

The auctioneer stood in front of the block.

"Show us a girl first," called the woman at Kestrel's side, her voice both loud and languid.

Many voices were shouting now, each calling for what they wanted to see. Kestrel found it hard to breathe.

"A girl!" yelled the pointy-chinned woman, this time more loudly.

The auctioneer, who had been sweeping his hands toward him as if gathering the cries and excitement, paused when the woman's shout cut through the noise. He glanced at her, then at Kestrel. A flicker of surprise seemed to show on his face. She thought that she must have imagined it, for he skipped on to Jess, then peered in a full semicircle at all the Valorians against the barrier above and around him.

He raised a hand. Silence fell. "I have something very special for you."

The acoustics of the pit were made to carry a whisper, and the auctioneer knew his trade. His soft voice made everyone lean closer.

His hand shifted to beckon toward the open, yet roofed and shadowed structure built low and small at the back of

the pit. He twitched his fingers once, then twice, and something stirred in the holding pen.

A young man stepped out.

The crowd murmured. Bewilderment grew as the slave slowly paced across the yellow sand. He stepped onto the auction block.

This was nothing special.

“Nineteen years old, and in fine condition.” The auctioneer clapped the slave on the back. “This one,” he said, “would be perfect for the house.”

Laughter rushed through the crowd. Valorians nudged each other and praised the auctioneer. He knew how to entertain.

The slave was bad goods. He looked, Kestrel thought, like a brute. A deep bruise on the slave’s cheek was evidence of a fight and a promise that he would be difficult to control. His bare arms were muscular, which likely only confirmed the crowd’s belief that he would be best working for someone with a whip in hand. Perhaps in another life he could have been groomed for a house; his hair was brown, light enough to please some Valorians, and while his features couldn’t be discerned from Kestrel’s distance, there was a proud line in the way he stood. But his skin was bronzed from outdoor labor, and surely it was to such work that he would return. He might be purchased by someone who needed a dockworker or a builder of walls.

Yet the auctioneer kept up his joke. “He could serve at your table.”

More laughter.

“Or be your valet.”

Valorians held their sides and fluttered their fingers, begging the auctioneer to stop, stop, he was too funny.

"I want to leave," Kestrel told Jess, who pretended not to hear.

"All right, all right." The auctioneer grinned. "The lad does have some real skills. On my honor," he added, laying a hand over his heart, and the crowd chuckled again, for it was common knowledge that there was no such thing as Herrani honor. "This slave has been trained as a blacksmith. He would be perfect for any soldier, especially for an officer with a guard of his own and weapons to maintain."

There was a murmur of interest. Herrani blacksmiths were rare. If Kestrel's father were here, he would probably bid. His guard had long complained about the quality of the city blacksmith's work.

"Shall we start the bidding?" said the auctioneer. "Five pilasters. Do I hear five bronze pilasters for the boy? Ladies and gentlemen, you could not *hire* a blacksmith for so little."

"Five," someone called.

"Six."

And the bidding began in earnest.

The bodies at Kestrel's back might as well have been stone. She couldn't move. She couldn't look at the expressions of her people. She couldn't catch the attention of Jess, or stare into the too-bright sky. These were all the reasons, she decided, why it was impossible to gaze anywhere else but at the slave.

"Oh, come now," said the auctioneer. "He's worth at least ten."

The slave's shoulders stiffened. The bidding continued.

Kestrel closed her eyes. When the price reached twenty-five pilasters, Jess said, “Kestrel, are you ill?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll leave as soon as it’s over. It won’t be long now.”

There was a lull in the bidding. It appeared the slave would go for twenty-five pilasters, a pitiful price, yet as much as anyone was willing to pay for a person who would soon be worked into uselessness.

“My dear Valorians,” said the auctioneer. “I have forgotten one thing. Are you sure he wouldn’t make a fine house slave? Because this lad can sing.”

Kestrel opened her eyes.

“Imagine music during dinner, how charmed your guests will be.” The auctioneer glanced up at the slave, who stood tall on his block. “Go on. Sing for them.”

Only then did the slave shift position. It was a slight movement and quickly stilled, but Jess sucked in her breath as if she, like Kestrel, expected a fight to break out in the pit below.

The auctioneer hissed at the slave in rapid Herrani, too quietly for Kestrel to understand.

The slave answered in his language. His voice was low: “No.”

Perhaps he didn’t know the acoustics of the pit. Perhaps he didn’t care, or worry that any Valorian knew at least enough Herrani to understand him. No matter. The auction was over now. No one would want him. Probably the person who had offered twenty-five pilasters was already regretting a bid for someone so intractable that he wouldn’t obey even his own kind.

But his refusal touched Kestrel. The stony set of the slave's shoulders reminded her of herself, when her father demanded something that she couldn't give.

The auctioneer was furious. He should have closed the sale or at least made a show of asking for a higher price, but he simply stood there, fists at his sides, likely trying to figure out how he could punish the young man before passing him on to the misery of cutting rock, or the heat of the forge.

Kestrel's hand moved on its own. "A keystone," she called.

The auctioneer turned. He sought the crowd. When he found Kestrel a smile sparked his expression into cunning delight. "Ah," he said, "*there* is someone who knows worth."

"Kestrel." Jess plucked at her sleeve. "What are you doing?"

The auctioneer's voice boomed: "Going once, going twice—"

"Twelve keystones!" called a man leaning against the barrier across from Kestrel, on the other side of its semi-circle.

The auctioneer's jaw dropped. "Twelve?"

"Thirteen!" came another cry.

Kestrel inwardly winced. If she had to bid anything—and why, why had she?—it shouldn't have been so high. Everyone thronged around the pit was looking at her: the general's daughter, a high society bird who flitted from one respectable house to the next. They thought—

"Fourteen!"

They thought that if *she* wanted the slave, he must merit the price. There must be a reason to want him, too.

"Fifteen!"

And the delicious mystery of *why* made one bid top the next.

The slave was staring at her now, and no wonder, since it was she who had ignited this insanity. Kestrel felt something within her swing on the hinge of fate and choice.

She lifted her hand. "I bid twenty keystones."

"Good heavens, girl," said the pointy-chinned woman to her left. "Drop out. Why bid on *him*? Because he's a singer? A singer of dirty Herrani drinking songs, if anything."

Kestrel didn't glance at her, or at Jess, though she sensed the girl was twisting her fingers. Kestrel's gaze didn't waver from the slave's.

"Twenty-five!" shouted a woman from behind.

The price was now more than Kestrel had in her purse. The auctioneer looked like he barely knew what to do with himself. The bidding spiraled higher, each voice spurring the next until it seemed that a roped arrow was shooting through the members of the crowd, binding them together, drawing them tight with excitement.

Kestrel's voice came out flat: "Fifty keystones."

The sudden, stunned quiet hurt her ears. Jess gasped.

"Sold!" cried the auctioneer. His face was wild with joy. "To Lady Kestrel, for fifty keystones!" He tugged the slave off the block, and it was only then that the youth's gaze broke away from Kestrel's. He looked at the sand, so intently that he could have been reading his future there, until the auctioneer prodded him toward the pen.

Kestrel drew in a shaky breath. Her bones felt watery. What had she done?

Jess slipped a supporting hand under her elbow. “You *are* sick.”

“And rather light of purse, I’d say.” The pointy-chinned woman snickered. “Looks like someone’s suffering the Winner’s Curse.”

Kestrel turned to her. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t come to auctions often, do you? The Winner’s Curse is when you come out on top of the bid, but only by paying a steep price.”

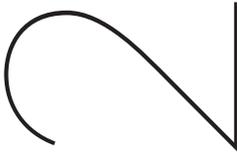
The crowd was thinning. Already the auctioneer was bringing out someone else, but the rope of excitement that had bound the Valorians to the pit had disintegrated. The show was over. The path was now clear for Kestrel to leave, yet she couldn’t move.

“I don’t understand,” said Jess.

Neither did Kestrel. What had she been thinking? What had she been trying to prove?

Nothing, she told herself. Her back to the pit, she made her foot take the first step away from what she had done.

Nothing at all.



THE WAITING ROOM OF THE HOLDING PEN WAS open to the air and faced the street. It smelled of unwashed flesh. Jess stayed close, eyeing the iron door set into the far wall. Kestrel tried not to do the same. It was her first time here. House slaves were usually purchased by her father or the family steward, who supervised them.

The auctioneer was waiting near soft chairs arranged for Valorian customers. “Ah.” He beamed when he saw Kestrel. “The winner! I hoped to be here before you arrived. I left the pit as soon as I could.”

“Do you always greet your customers personally?” She was surprised at his eagerness.

“Yes, the good ones.”

Kestrel wondered how much could be heard through the tiny barred window of the iron door.

“Otherwise,” the auctioneer continued, “I leave the final transaction in the hands of my assistant. She’s in the pit now, trying to unload twins.” He rolled his eyes at the

difficulty of keeping family together. “Well”—he shrugged—“someone might want a matched set.”

Two Valorians entered the waiting room, a husband and wife. The auctioneer smiled, asked if they would mind taking a seat, and said he would be with them shortly. Jess whispered in Kestrel’s ear, saying that the couple settling into the low chairs in a far corner were friends of her parents. Did Kestrel mind if she went to greet them?

“No,” said Kestrel, “I don’t.” She couldn’t blame Jess for feeling uncomfortable with the gritty details of purchasing people, even if the fact of it shaped every hour of her life, from the moment a slave drew her morning bath to when another unbraided her hair for bed.

After Jess had joined the husband and wife, Kestrel looked meaningfully at the auctioneer. He nodded. He pulled a thick key from his pocket, went to unlock the door, and stepped inside. “You,” Kestrel heard him say in Herrani. “Time to leave.”

There was a rustle and the auctioneer returned. The slave walked behind.

He lifted his gaze to meet Kestrel’s. His eyes were a clear, cool gray.

They startled her. Yet she should have expected to see this color in a Herrani, and Kestrel thought it must be the livid bruise on his cheek that made the expression in his eyes so uncanny. Still, she grew uncomfortable under his gaze. Then his lashes fell. He looked at the ground, letting long hair obscure his face. One side was still swollen from the fight, or beating.

He seemed perfectly indifferent to anything around him. Kestrel didn't exist, or the auctioneer, or even himself.

The auctioneer locked the iron door. "Now." He clasped his hands together in a single clap. "The small matter of payment."

She handed the auctioneer her purse. "I have twenty-four keystones."

The auctioneer paused, uncertain. "Twenty-four is not fifty, my lady."

"I will send my steward with the rest later today."

"Ah, but what if he loses his way?"

"I am General Trajan's daughter."

He smiled. "I know."

"The full amount is no difficulty for us," Kestrel continued. "I simply chose not to carry fifty keystones with me today. My word is good."

"I'm sure." He didn't mention that Kestrel could return at another time to collect her purchase and pay in full, and Kestrel said nothing of the rage she had seen in his face when the slave defied him, or of her suspicion that the auctioneer would take revenge. The likelihood of it rose with every moment the slave remained here.

Kestrel watched the auctioneer think. He could insist she return later, risk offending her, and lose the entire sum. Or he could pocket not even half of fifty keystones now and perhaps never obtain the rest.

But he was clever. "May I escort you home with your purchase? I would like to see Smith settled in safely. Your steward can take care of the cost then."

She glanced at the slave. He had blinked at his name, but didn't lift his face. "Fine," she told the auctioneer.

She crossed the waiting room to Jess and asked the husband and wife if they would escort the girl home.

"Of course," said the husband—Senator Nicon, Kestrel remembered. "But what of you?"

She nodded at the two men over her shoulder. "They will come with me."

Jess knew a Herrani auctioneer and a rebellious slave were not the ideal escort. Kestrel knew it, too, but a flash of resentment at her situation—at the situation she had created—made her sick with all the rules that governed her world.

Jess said, "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

The couple raised eyebrows, yet clearly decided that the situation was none of their business except as a piece of gossip to spread.

Kestrel left the slave market, the auctioneer and Smith trailing behind her.

She walked quickly through the neighborhoods that separated this dingy part of town from the Garden District. The cross-hatching of streets was ordered, right-angled, Valorian-designed. She knew the way, yet had the odd sense of being lost. Today, everything seemed foreign. When she passed through the Warriors' Quarter, whose dense barracks she had run through as a child, she imagined soldiers rising against her.

Though of course any of these armed men and women would die to protect her, and expected her to become one of

their own. Kestrel had only to obey her father's wishes and enlist.

When the streets began to change, to twist in irrational directions and bend like water, Kestrel was relieved. Trees leafed into a green canopy overhead. She could hear fountains behind high stone walls.

She came to a massive iron door. One of her father's guards peered through its window and swung the door open.

Kestrel said nothing to him or the other guards, and they said nothing to her. She led the way across the grounds. The auctioneer and slave followed.

She was home. But the footfalls behind her on the flagstone path reminded Kestrel that this had not always been her home. This estate, and the entire Garden District, had been made by the Herrani, who had called it by another name when it had been theirs.

She stepped onto the lawn. So did the men, their footsteps now hushed by grass.

A yellow bird trilled and swooped through the trees. Kestrel listened until the song dwindled. She continued toward the villa.

The sound of her sandals on the marble floor of the entryway echoed gently against walls painted with leaping creatures, flowers, and gods she didn't know. Her footfalls blurred into the whisper of water bubbling up from a shallow pool set into the floor.

"A beautiful home," said the auctioneer.

She glanced at him sharply, though she heard nothing

bitter in his voice. She searched him for some sign that he recognized the house, that he had visited it—as an honored guest, friend, or even family member—before the Herran War. But that was a foolish notion. The villas in the Garden District had belonged to aristocratic Herrani, and if the auctioneer had been one of those, he wouldn't have ended up in his line of work. He would have become a house slave, perhaps a tutor for Valorian children. If the auctioneer *did* know her house, it was because he had delivered slaves here for her father.

She hesitated to look at Smith. When she did, he refused to look back.

The housekeeper came toward her down the long hall that stretched beyond the fountain. Kestrel sent her away again with the order to fetch the steward and ask him to return with twenty-six kestones. When the steward arrived, his blond brows were drawn together and the hands holding a small coffer were tight. Harman's hands became tighter still when he noticed the auctioneer and slave.

Kestrel opened the coffer and counted money into the auctioneer's outstretched hand. He pocketed the silver, then emptied her purse, which he had carried with him. With a slight bow, he returned the flat bag to her. "Such a pleasure to have your business." He turned to go.

She said, "There had better not be a fresh mark on him."

The auctioneer's eyes flicked to the slave and traced his rags, his dirty, scarred arms. "You're welcome to inspect, my lady," the auctioneer drawled.

Kestrel frowned, unsettled by the idea of inspecting any

person, let alone *this* person. But before she could form a response, the auctioneer had left.

“How much?” Harman demanded. “How much, total, did this cost?”

She told him.

He drew in a long breath. “Your father—”

“I will tell my father.”

“Well, what am I supposed to do with *him*?”

Kestrel looked at the slave. He hadn’t moved, but remained standing on the same black tile as if still on the auction block. He had ignored the entire conversation, tuning out the Valorian he probably didn’t fully understand. His eyes were raised, resting on a painted nightingale that graced a far wall. “This is Smith,” Kestrel told the steward.

Harman’s anxiety eased somewhat. “A blacksmith?” Slaves were sometimes named by masters for their work. “We could use that. I’ll send him to the forge.”

“Wait. I’m not sure that’s where I want him.” She spoke to Smith in Herrani: “Do you sing?”

He looked at her then, and Kestrel saw the same expression she had seen earlier in the waiting room. His gray eyes were icy. “No.”

Smith had answered in her language, and his accent was light.

He turned away. Dark hair fell forward. It curtained his profile.

Kestrel’s nails bit into her palms. “See to it that he has a bath,” she told Harman in a voice she hoped was brisk rather than frustrated. “Give him appropriate clothes.”

She started to walk down the hallway, then stopped. The words flashed out of her mouth: "And cut his hair."

Kestrel felt the chill of Smith's gaze on her back as she retreated. It was easy, now, to name that expression in his eyes.

Contempt.



KESTREL DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY.

Her father, fresh from a bath after a hot day of training soldiers, watered his wine. The third course was served: small hens stuffed with spiced raisins and crushed almonds. It tasted dry to her.

“Did you practice?” he asked.

“No.”

His large hands paused in their movements.

“I will,” she said. “Later.” She drank from her cup, then ran a thumb over its surface. The glass was smoky green and finely blown. It had come with the house. “How are the new recruits?”

“Wet behind the ears, but not a bad lot.” He shrugged. “We need them.”

Kestrel nodded. The Valorians had always faced barbarian invasions on the fringes of their territories, and as the empire had grown in the past five years, attacks became more frequent. They didn't threaten the Herran peninsula,

but General Trajan often trained battalions that would be sent to the empire's outer reaches.

He prodded a glazed carrot with his fork. Kestrel looked at the silver utensil, its tines shining sharply in the candlelight. It was a Herrani invention, one that had been absorbed into her culture so long ago it was easy to forget Valorians had ever eaten with their fingers.

"I thought you were going to the market this afternoon with Jess," he said. "Why didn't she join us for dinner?"

"She didn't accompany me home."

He set down his fork. "Then who did?"

"Father, I spent fifty keystones today."

He waved a hand to indicate that the sum was irrelevant. His voice was deceptively calm: "If you walked through the city alone, *again*—"

"I didn't." She told him who had come home with her, and why.

The general rubbed his brow and squeezed his eyes shut. "*That* was your escort?"

"I don't need an escort."

"You certainly wouldn't, if you enlisted."

And there they were, pressing the sore spot of an old argument. "I will never be a soldier," she said.

"You've made that clear."

"If a woman can fight and die for the empire, why can't a woman walk alone?"

"That's the point. A woman *soldier* has proved her strength, and so doesn't need protection."

"Neither do I."

The general flattened his hands against the table. When a girl came to clear away the plates, he barked at her to leave.

“You honestly don’t believe that *Jess* could offer me any protection,” Kestrel said.

“Women who are not soldiers don’t walk alone. It’s custom.”

“Our customs are absurd. Valorians take pride in being able to survive on little food if we must, but an evening meal is an insult if it’s not at least seven courses. I can fight well enough, but if I’m not a soldier it’s as if years of training don’t exist.”

Her father gave her a level look. “Your military strength has never been in combat.”

Which was another way of saying that she was a poor fighter.

More gently, he said, “You’re a strategist.”

Kestrel shrugged.

Her father said, “Who suggested I draw the Dacran barbarians into the mountains when they attacked the empire’s eastern border?”

All she had done then was point out the obvious. The barbarians’ overreliance on cavalry had been clear. So, too, had been the fact that the dry eastern mountains would starve horses of water. If anyone was a strategist, it was her father. He was strategizing that very moment, using flattery to get what he wanted.

“Imagine how the empire would benefit if you truly worked with me,” he said, “and used that talent to secure its territories, instead of pulling apart the logic of customs that order our society.”

“Our customs are lies.” Kestrel’s fingers clenched the fragile stem of her glass.

Her father’s gaze fell to her tight hand. He reached for it. Quietly, firmly, he said, “These are not my rules. They are the empire’s. Fight for it, and have your independence. Don’t, and accept your constraints. Either way, you live by our laws.” He raised one finger. “And you don’t complain.”

Then she wouldn’t say anything at all, Kestrel decided. She snatched her hand away and stood. She remembered how the slave had used his silence as a weapon. He had been haggled over, pushed, led, peered at. He would be cleaned, shorn, dressed. Yet he had refused to give up everything.

Kestrel knew strength when she encountered it.

So did her father. His light brown eyes narrowed at her.

She left the dining hall. She stalked down the northern wing of the villa until she reached a set of double doors. She threw them open and felt her way through the dark interior for a small silver box and an oil lamp. Her fingers were familiar with this ritual. It was no trouble to light the lamp blind. She could play blind, too, but didn’t want to risk missing a note. Not tonight, not when today she had done little but fumble and err.

She skirted the piano in the center of the room, skimming a palm across its flat, polished surface. The instrument was one of the few things her family had brought from the capital. It had been her mother’s.

Kestrel opened several glass doors that led into the garden. She breathed in the night, letting its air pool inside her lungs.

But she smelled jasmine. She imagined its tiny flower

blooming in the dark, each petal stiff and pointed and perfect. She thought again of the slave, and didn't know why.

She looked at her traitor of a hand, the one that had lifted to catch the eye of the auctioneer.

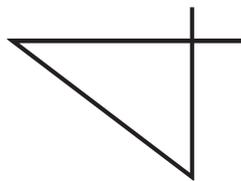
Kestrel shook her head. She wouldn't think about the slave anymore.

She sat in front of the instrument's row of black and white keys, nearly a hundred of them.

This wasn't the kind of practice her father had had in mind. He had meant her daily sessions with the captain of his guard. Well, she didn't want to train at Needles, or anything else her father thought she should learn.

Her fingers rested on the keys. She pressed slightly, not quite hard enough for the hammers inside to strike the loom of metallic cords.

She took a deep breath and began to play.



SHE HAD FORGOTTEN HIM.

Three days passed, and the lady of the house seemed entirely oblivious to the fact that she had purchased a slave to add to the general's collection of forty-eight.

The slave wasn't sure he felt relieved.

The first two days had been blissful. He couldn't remember the last time he had been allowed to be lazy. The bath had been amazingly hot, and the soap made him stare through the steam. The lather was richer than he'd had in years. It smelled like memories.

It left his skin feeling new, and though he'd held his head rigid while another Herrani slave cut his hair, and though he kept lifting his hand to sweep aside locks that were gone, on the second day he found that he didn't mind so much. It gave him a clear view of his world.

On the third day, the steward came for him.

The slave, having no orders, had been wandering the grounds. The house was off-limits, but he was content to consider it from the outside. He counted its many windows

and doors. He lay on the grass, letting its warm green static tickle his palms, glad that his hands weren't too calloused to feel it. The yellow ocher of the villa walls glowed in the light, then faded. He listed in his mind which rooms of the house grew dark at which time of the day. He gazed up at orange trees. Sometimes, he slept.

The other slaves did their best to ignore him. At first, they shot him looks that varied from resentment to confusion to longing. He couldn't bring himself to care. As soon as he'd been directed to the slaves' quarters, housed in a building that looked almost exactly like the stables, he caught on to the pecking order of the general's Herrani. He was last.

He ate his bread like the rest of them, and shrugged whenever asked why he hadn't been assigned to a task. He answered direct questions. Mostly, though, he listened.

On the third day, he was making a mental map of the outbuildings: the slaves' quarters, the stables, the barracks for the general's private guard, the forge, small sheds for storage, a little cottage near the garden. The estate, particularly for being still part of the city, was large. The slave felt lucky that he had so many free hours to study it.

He was sitting on a gentle hill near the orchard, at a height that let him see the steward striding toward him from the villa long before the Valorian arrived. This pleased the slave. It confirmed what he had come to suspect: that General Trajan's home would not be easy to defend if attacked in the right way. The estate had probably been given to the general because it was the largest and finest in the city, and ideal for maintaining a personal guard and horses,

but the tree-covered slopes surrounding the house would have advantages for an unfriendly force. The slave wondered if the general truly didn't see this. Then again, Valorians didn't know what it was like to be attacked at home.

The slave stopped his thoughts. They threatened to plow up his past. He willed his mind to be frosted earth: hard and barren.

He focused on the sight of the steward huffing up the hill. The steward was one of the few Valorian servants, like the housekeeper, whose positions were too important to be assigned to Herrani. The slave assumed that the steward was well paid. He was certainly well dressed, in the gold-shot fabrics Valorians favored. The man's thin yellow hair flew in the breeze. As he came closer, the slave heard him muttering in Valorian, and knew himself to be the target of the man's irritation.

"You," the steward said in heavily accented Herrani. "There you be, lazy good-for-nothing."

The slave remembered the man's name—Harman—but didn't use it. He didn't say anything, just let Harman vent his anger. It amused him to hear the man butcher his language. The steward's accent was laughable, his grammar worse. His only skill was a rich vocabulary of insults.

"You come." Harman jerked a hand to indicate that he should be followed.

The slave quickly realized he was being led to the forge.

Another Herrani was waiting outside. He recognized her, though he saw her only for meals and at night. Her name was Lirah, and she worked in the house. She was pretty; younger than him, probably too young to remember the war.

Harman began talking at her in Valorian. The slave tried to be patient as Lirah translated.

“Lady Kestrel can’t be bothered to place you, so I”—she blushed—“I mean, *he*”—she nodded at Harman—“has decided to set you to work. Usually the general’s guard see to their own weapon repair, and a Valorian blacksmith from the city is hired on a regular basis to forge new weapons.”

The slave nodded. There were good reasons why the Valorians trained few Herrani blacksmiths. One had only to look around the forge to understand. Anyone could see the heavy tools and guess the strength it would take to manipulate them.

“You will do this from now on,” Lirah continued, “so long as you prove to be competent.”

Harman took the silence that followed as an invitation to speak again. Lirah translated. “Today you will make horseshoes.”

“Horseshoes?” That was too easy.

Lirah gave him a sympathetic smile. When she spoke, it was in her own voice, not the stilted repeating of Harman’s. “It’s a test. You’re supposed to make as many as you can before sunset. Can you shoe a horse, too?”

“Yes.”

Lirah seemed to regret this answer on his behalf. She told the steward, who said, “That’s what he’ll be doing tomorrow, then. Every horse in the stable needs to be shod.” He snorted. “We’ll see how this animal gets along with the other ones.”

Before the war, Valorians had admired, even envied—yes, envied—the Herrani. After, it was as if the spell had been broken or a new one had been cast. The slave never

could quite believe it. Somehow, “animal” had become possible. Somehow, the word named *him*. This was a discovery ten years old and yet remade every day. It should have been dulled by repetition. Instead, he was sore from its constant cut of surprise. He was sour with swallowed anger.

The pleasant, trained expression on Lirah’s face hadn’t faltered. She pointed to the coal bin, kindling, and heaps of raw and used iron. The steward set a box of matches on the anvil. Then they left.

The slave looked around the forge and debated whether he should pass the test or fail.

He sighed, and lit a fire.

His holiday was over. On his first day in the forge, the slave made more than fifty horseshoes—enough to appear dedicated and skilled, but not so much that he drew attention. The following day, he shod all the horses, even those whose shoes were new. The groom warned that some of the animals could be dangerous to handle, especially the general’s stallions, but the slave had no trouble. He made sure, however, that the task took the whole day. He liked listening to the horses’ low whickers and feeling their gentle, warm breath. Also, the stables were a decent place to hear news—or they would have been, if a soldier had come to exercise a horse.

Or if the girl had.

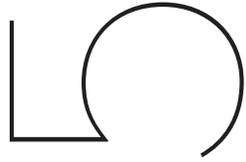
The slave was judged to be a good buy. Lady Kestrel had a fine eye, Harman said grudgingly, and the slave was given several weapons to repair, as well as orders for new ones.

Every dusk, when the slave walked across the grounds from the forge to his quarters, the villa blazed with light. It was curfew and bedtime for slaves, but the restless Valorians would stay up for a long while yet. They trained to get by on very little sleep, perhaps six hours a night—less, if necessary. It was one of the things that had helped them win the war.

The slave was the first to stretch out on his pallet. Each night, he tried to sift through the events of the day and glean useful information from them, but all he had experienced was hard work.

Weary, he shut his eyes. He wondered if those two days of idyll would turn out to have been a stroke of bad fortune. That time had let him forget who he was. It played tricks with his mind.

Sometimes, at the edge of sleep, he thought he heard music.



USUALLY, KESTREL THOUGHT OF HER HOUSE AS an echoing place, one filled with mostly uninhabited, if lovely, rooms. The grounds, too, were quiet, the noises small: the scratch of a hoe in the garden, the faint thud of horse hooves from the paddock set far back from the house, the sigh of trees. Usually, Kestrel enjoyed how the space and quiet made her senses more awake.

Lately, however, she had no peace at home. She sequestered herself with her music, but found that she played only difficult pieces, with notes clustered thickly together, her fingers chasing each other across the keys. Her sessions left her worn. The stiffness was minor and in localized spots—her wrists, the small of her back—but when she wasn't playing she couldn't ignore the twinges. Each morning she would swear to herself that she would go gently on the piano. Yet at dusk, after hours of feeling suffocated—no, as if she were *hiding* in her own home—she would again wrest something demanding from the music.

One afternoon, perhaps eight days after the auction, a

note came from Jess. Kestrel eagerly opened it, glad for the distraction. Jess, in her typical swirly writing and short, eager sentences, asked why Kestrel was hiding from her. Would she please pay Jess a visit today? Kestrel's advice on what to wear to Lady Faris's picnic was needed. Jess added a postscript: a sentence in smaller writing, the letters bunched and hurried, signaling that she couldn't resist dropping an obvious hint even at the same time she worried it would bother Kestrel: *By the way, my brother has been asking about you.*

Kestrel reached for her riding boots.

As she wound through the rooms of her suite, she caught a glimpse in a window of the thatched cottage near the garden.

Kestrel paused, the leather boots in her hand tapping against her thigh. The cottage was not so far away from the slaves' quarters, which loomed at the border of the window's view. She felt a tug of discomfort.

Of course she did. Kestrel glanced away from the slaves' quarters and focused on Enai's cottage. She hadn't been to see her old nurse in several days. No wonder the view troubled her, when it showed the sweet little house Kestrel had had built for the woman who had raised her. Well, she would visit Enai on her way to the stables.

But by the time she had finished lacing her boots and gone downstairs, the steward had already discovered through the almost instantaneous gossip of the household that Kestrel was leaving. Harman ambushed her by the parlor door.

"Going for a ride, my lady?"

She pulled on a glove. "As you see."

“No need to ask for an escort.” He snapped his fingers at an older Herrani man scrubbing the floor. “This one will do.”

Kestrel let out a slow breath. “I am *riding* to Jess’s house.”

“I’m sure he can ride,” Harman said, though they both knew full well this wasn’t likely. Riding was not taught to slaves. Either they had the skill from before the war or never would. “If not,” Harman said, “you can take the carriage together. The general would gladly spare the use of two horses for the carriage to make sure you’re properly escorted.”

Kestrel nodded, just barely. She turned to leave.

“My lady, one more thing . . .”

Kestrel knew what that one more thing would be, but couldn’t stop him, for to do so would have been to admit that she knew and wished she didn’t.

“A week has passed since your purchase of that young slave,” the steward said. “You’ve given no instructions for his employment.”

“I forgot,” Kestrel lied.

“Of course. You have more important things to deal with. Still, I was certain you had no intention of him lazing around, doing nothing, so I assigned him to the forge and to serve as a farrier for the horses. He has done well. My compliments, Lady Kestrel. You are an excellent judge of the Herrani market.”

She looked at him.

Defensively, he said, “I only put him to work in the forge because he was suited to it.”

She faced the door. When she opened it, she’d see

nothing but trees. There was no view from this part of the house that could unsettle her. “You made the right choice,” she said. “Do with him as you see fit.”

Kestrel stepped outside, her escort wordlessly following.

She didn’t stop by the cottage after all. She walked straight to the stables. The old Herrani groom was there, as always. There was no one else. Kestrel went to stroke the nose of her horse, a big-boned animal bred for war and chosen for her by the general.

When she heard footsteps behind her, the sound of someone new entering the stables, she turned. Two soldiers walked up to the groom and ordered that their horses be saddled. Kestrel looked beyond them and saw the Herrani slave Harman had selected as her escort waiting patiently by the door.

She had no wish to waste time finding out if he could ride. She wanted to leave now. When they reached Jess’s house she would send him to the kitchens so she wouldn’t have to see him until the return home.

“Ready my carriage first,” she told the groom, giving the soldiers a look that dared them to argue. They didn’t, but were visibly irritated. She didn’t care. She had to leave, the sooner the better.

“This one?”

Kestrel looked up from where she sat on a low divan strewn with dresses.

“Kestrel,” said Jess, “pay attention.”

Kestrel blinked. A black-haired girl, Jess’s slave, was tying

a sash around her mistress's waist, drawing in the flowery skirts so that they belled at the hips. Kestrel said to Jess, "Didn't you already try on that dress?"

"No." Jess snatched the sash out of the slave's hands and threw it onto the silken pile next to Kestrel. "You hate it, don't you?"

"No," said Kestrel, but Jess was already struggling out of the dress while her slave anxiously tried to undo its buttons before they popped. Pink skirts landed on Kestrel's lap.

"What are you going to wear?" Jess stood there in her slip. "Lady Faris's picnic is *the* event of the summer season. You can't look less than stunning."

"That will pose no problem for Kestrel," said a trim, stylishly dressed man lounging against the jamb of the door he had opened without their hearing. Jess's brother smiled at Kestrel.

Kestrel smiled back at Ronan, but in a crooked way that showed that she knew his exaggerated brand of flirtation was all the rage among young Valorian men these days and not to be taken seriously. She also knew that this—this dress-up session, Ronan's safe compliments—was what she had come for, in the hopes her mind would become too cluttered to think for itself.

He crossed the room, pushed dresses off the divan and onto the floor, and sat next to Kestrel. The black-haired slave, looking besieged, bent to collect the delicate fabrics.

Kestrel felt a sudden impulse to say something sharp, but wasn't sure to whom. Then the strains of music drifting in from the corridor saved her from embarrassing everyone in the room, including herself.

“The Senest nocturne,” she said, recognizing the piece.

Ronan tilted his blond head against the ornately carved wood that edged the divan. He slunk against its soft back, stretching out his booted legs, and gazed up at Kestrel. “I told Olen to play,” he said, referring to their Herrani musician. “I know it’s one of your favorites.”

Kestrel listened. The notes were careful, but oddly paced. She tensed at the arrival of a tricky passage and wasn’t surprised to hear it flubbed.

“I could play,” she offered.

Brother and sister exchanged a look. “Another time,” Ronan said. “Our parents are home.”

“They won’t notice.”

“You’re too talented.” He rested a hand on hers. “They will.”

Kestrel slipped her hand away. Unbothered, Ronan reached for a stray ribbon between them and toyed with the strip of fabric, weaving it around his pale fingers. “So,” he said, “what’s this I hear about your extravagant purchase at the auction? Everyone’s talking about it.”

“Or they were,” said Jess, “until a duel between the Trenex cousins.”

“To the death?” said Kestrel. Duels had been banned by the emperor, but they were too entrenched a custom to be easily rooted out. They were usually overlooked by the authorities so long as there was no loss of life, and even then the only punishment was a levied fine.

“No,” said Jess excitedly, “but blood was drawn.”

“Tell me everything.”

Jess inhaled, ready to spill her gossip, but Ronan raised

one ribboned finger and pointed it at Kestrel. "You," he said, "are changing the subject. Go on. Explain the mystery that cost you fifty keystones."

"There is no mystery." She decided to give a sensible reason that had nothing to do with why she had bought him.

And why *had* she?

Pity, perhaps. That strange sense of affinity.

Or had it been nothing more than simple, shameful possession?

"The slave is a blacksmith," Kestrel said. "My father keeps a personal guard. We needed someone to maintain weapons."

"That's what the auctioneer advertised," Jess said, stepping into another dress. "The slave was a perfect fit for Kestrel's household."

Ronan raised his brows. "To the tune of fifty keystones?"

"What do I care?" Kestrel wanted to end this conversation. "I am wealthy enough." She touched Ronan's sleeve. "And how much"—she rubbed the silk between her fingers—"did this cost?"

Ronan, whose deftly embroidered shirt was easily the same price the slave had been, allowed that a point had been made.

"He will last longer than this shirt." Kestrel let go of the cloth. "I'd say I got a bargain."

"True enough," said Ronan, looking disappointed, though whether because she had pulled away or because her mystery had turned out to be not so mysterious, Kestrel couldn't say. She preferred the latter. She wanted to forget the slave, and for everyone else to do the same.

“Speaking of clothes,” said Jess, “we still haven’t settled on what I am to wear.”

“What about this?” Kestrel stood, glad for an excuse to leave the divan, and crossed the dressing room to lift out a dress whose sleeve peeked from an open wardrobe. She held it, gazing at the extremely light shade of lilac. She ran a hand under the sleeve and let it fall, admiring its shimmer. It was silvery. “The fabric is lovely.”

“Kestrel, are you mad?” Jess’s eyes were wide. Ronan laughed, and Kestrel realized it was because he thought she had made a joke.

“I don’t know why I even own that dress,” Jess said. “The color is so unfashionable. Why, it’s practically gray!”

Kestrel shot Jess a startled look, but didn’t see her friend’s face. She saw only the memory of the slave’s bitter, beautiful eyes.