

THE KINDER POISON

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents
either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously,
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For Eve,
so you may know that however wild your dreams,
you can achieve them.



THE KINDER POISON



All good stories start with bad decisions.

This is the questionable mantra I repeat in my head as we watch the boat come in. It's a beautiful vessel, so unlike the plain wooden canoes that always flock Atera's river docks. The hull is glass, and through it I can see the dawn and the orange sands of the desert; the water and the reed-choked shore. As it draws nearer, the sun ignites along its edges like fire, the deep blue canopy above seeming to flutter in the heat. Guards with golden leopard masks and sickle swords patrol its railings, and in the river, the magic propelling it glows like a trail of fading stars.

It is a ship where legends are made.

It's also a ship where poor choices will be made, but Hen said I have to stop focusing on that part. I've lain on this roof a thousand mornings, imagining myself sailing to all the incredible places the desert travelers speak of, and not once has playing it safe helped me follow in their footsteps. Their adventures never start with, "Well, I waited patiently at home for something to happen, and it did!" No—proper stories start with risks. Switched identities, drinking unlabeled potions, trusting mysterious strangers. I'm not sure any of them ever started with lying to a priest, but again—I'm not focusing on that right now.

"There he is," Hen says, pointing to said priest: a shirtless bald man standing near the front of the boat. We're lying atop the roof of her house, one of the many flat-topped homes that line the river's shore. The second story gives us a perfect vantage point

of the ship without it being too obvious we're here. The priest's gaze stays low, on the children who whoop and run on the muddy bank, their colorful tunics like flags. The tattooed prayers circling his pale arms and the pure white of his *tergus* kilt would have given him away even if Hen hadn't pointed him out.

He's the one carrying the ledger we need. No one boards that boat if their name isn't listed, and if I don't get to the palace now . . .

Well, there won't be another chance. This is the first time a royal boat has ported in Atera in six hundred *years*.

"That's the one we'll really need to watch," Hen says, pointing to a woman in a stunning blue *jole*—a formal wrap dress favored by the nobility. Hers is embellished with pearls and real lilies, and I squint, trying to make sense of my friend's warning. There's absolutely nothing daunting about the woman. In fact, compared to the armed guards and the scowl I now see on the priest's face, she looks delightful.

"Who is that?" I whisper.

"Galena of Juvel," Hen growls. "Royal Materialist, and thorn in my side. She's the one who made lotus boots a thing."

I glance at the woman's feet. Her sandals look no different from the ones Hen often wears, but instead of ending at her heel, black lotus flowers twist up her brown legs to her knees.

"I think they're cute," I admit.

"Of course they are! They were my idea!"

One of the guards looks toward the roof, and we both duck down.

"We've been over this," I whisper. "Just because you get a weekly update on the lives of famous people doesn't mean they have the

slightest idea of who you are. I'm sure it was just a coincidence."

"Was it?" Hen says, glaring as the woman drifts past. "Or was it conspiracy?"

"Well, when *you're* the Royal Materialist, you can ask her."

"Oh, I will." She grits her teeth. "I will."

I snicker at her response. One of my favorite things about Hen is her absolute confidence, as if rising from a simple—albeit distinguished—young Materialist in Atera to the person who crafts the latest fashions for the queen is only a matter of time. Though really, she's already on her way. Now that we're sixteen, this summer marks our last as apprentices, and Hen has already received dozens of letters from Orkena's nobility, commending her creativity and requesting her services upon her transition to Master. Soon she'll be traveling the country, using her rare ability to combine unusual materials, even fire or light or a stream of starlit water, into clothing for the elite. She can make dresses out of moonglow, and cloaks infused with dew so they stay cool even during the hottest afternoons. Meanwhile, the number of people excited for me to become a Master is one: my father. Which I appreciate, but it's not the same.

Hen's name is already on that ledger. I'm trying not to think too hard about why mine isn't, and how that's one of the many ways our lives are about to diverge.

"Just please don't talk to her about the boots *today*," I say, recognizing the glint in Hen's eyes.

Her black hair swings as she looks over. "I make no promises when it comes to war."

"And I'd be happy to help you plot later. But can we focus right

now on the bigger task I'll probably come to regret? They're almost at the dock."

Hen's brown eyes narrow, tracking her mark. She taps a finger against her lips and shoves to her feet. "Follow me."

She disappears down the ladder in the roof. I follow in haste, earning a splinter when I slide too fast down the wood, and drop to the tiled floor of the upstairs hallway. Cool air emanates from the enchanted mudbrick walls, the spell that chills them hidden beneath a layer of creamy plaster. Within the hour, the house will feel drastically cooler than the summer air outside. I try to absorb as much of it as I can through my thin working dress. The stable is never unbearably hot, but it definitely doesn't hold on to the cold like Hen's house.

Rainbow-hued mats line the floor, and I smile as we pass rooms I know as well as my own. Hen's bedroom with her towers of dark, shimmering fabric, and her mother's nearly as cluttered, its walls and dressers covered in the rare items she accepts in trade for her potions. A bright weaving from the river country ripples with the light; a giraffe carving made of sandalwood and ebony sits upon the nightstand. Before my mother got sick, she and Hen's mother used to travel all over, selling potions and drinking in the world. I used to tell her that would be Hen and me someday, before I understood the magic I was born with wasn't the kind that would help me leave Atera. Apparently the ability to talk to animals doesn't actually impress anyone—including most animals—hence the lack of my name on the ledger.

But even our mothers had never been to the *palace*. And though tonight's party will only encompass one glorious, wonder-filled

night, it will be my chance to experience a sliver of the life I thought Hen and I could never have.

I cannot miss that boat.

“We’re going to go with the ‘distract and dominate’ plan,” Hen says, the hem of her green wrap dress flaring as she starts down the rosewood stairs. “You’re going to provide the distraction, while I sneak the ledger from the priest’s bag. I’ll slip out of view and add your fake name. Then I’ll put it back, and when they go to check people in later, aha! You’ll be there.”

“And you’re putting me down as a Potionmaker, right?” I ask. We decided it would be safest if I assumed a false identity to get onto the boat, to avoid anyone recognizing a Whisperer absolutely shouldn’t be there. It seemed only natural to use my late mother’s name, as well as her (and Hen’s mother’s) power. That way I know some basics about the magic if anyone asks, not to mention potionmaking would be entirely impractical to demonstrate on board, unlike the elemental magics that can be conjured from the air.

“Yes,” Hen confirms.

“And you’re sure they’re not going to make me prove it?”

She waves me off. “Let me worry about the details. You worry about the fantastic party awaiting us. Jeweled gardens, live peacocks, a dance floor the size of a town . . .”

“Hen, if I end up as the human sacrifice because you were thinking about dance floors instead of contest regulations—”

Hen stops, leaning solemnly against the wall. “This is not my first time, Zahru.” Meaning not her first time *breaking the law*, and I force myself to smile. It may appear I’m taking this all in stride,

but I'm also the girl who had a moral crisis once after a merchant gave me too much change, and I'm ignoring that this lie will probably haunt me forever.

"My associate looked into it," she continues. "The officials have so much else to deal with that even if we're caught, we'll just be removed from the palace grounds. And you know the sacrifice is actually a holy honor, right?"

"Right," I say, fidgeting as Hen starts down the stairs again. But I'll admit some of my excitement is dampened by the reminder of what tonight actually is. Atera has been so abuzz since His Majesty, the Mestrah, announced the Crossing, it's easy to forget that after the parties and celebration, real people will risk their lives for the sake of Orkena's future. Today, the royal boats will bring much of the nation's upper class to the palace—one per household—including a select group of Master magicians who will actually participate in the contest. While these contenders split off to compete for a spot on a prince or princess's team, the others like Hen (and hopefully, me) will get the run of the palace, including a viewing area where we can watch the selection process.

Then tomorrow, their teams chosen, the royal heirs will start on a weeklong race across the desert, where they'll battle the elements and each other and gods know what else to reach the sacred Glass Caves. Where the winner, destined to be our new Mestrah, will have to secure their victory by taking a human life.

The gods haven't called for a Crossing in centuries. I know I must trust the Mestrah, and that I should feel nothing but pride for the contest's reinstatement. But I also can't forget that the very

reason it was discontinued was because a prior Mestrah deemed the race too brutal. I wonder what changed the gods' minds.

"Going out?" calls Hen's mother as we reach the bottom of the stairs. As is typical for the mornings, Hen's *mora* sits on a cheery yellow tapestry in the main room, eyes winged in lines of kohl, plump legs crossed as she readies her wares for the market. Potion ingredients spread around her like a rainbow: yellow vials of palm oil, blue scorpion claws and orange beetle wings, pink lotus petals and green desert sage. Focus dots circle her beige wrists, drops of liquid gold that steady her hands and center the magic she'll use in the potions.

"Oh, just heading out to lie to a priest and crash the palace banquet," I say, trying to sound clever. I want to embrace this daring new lifestyle, and Hen's mother seems like the best place to start because she won't take me seriously.

"Oh, good," she says—taking me completely seriously. "I've been scheming ever since that sour messenger told me only one of us could go."

"She told him she had *two* daughters," Hen says, glancing at me.

Her mother scowls. "And you know what he said? 'Send the prettiest one. You're too old.' The cod. I hope he doesn't find himself in need of my services anytime soon."

She smiles as she pours green liquid into a rounded vial, coating the dried tarantula at the bottom. I have to admit she's the one person in the world who scares me more than Hen, which is why I'm very glad that when my mother passed, and Hen's father decided he felt "too tied down" and left the country without them, the broken edges of our families sewed into one. I even call

her Mora to honor what she means to me. I'm fairly certain this woman would poison someone for me.

"Be safe, my hearts," Mora says, pinching gold flake atop the now-bubbling potion. "And let me know if you need my help."

"We will," we promise, kissing her cheeks.

We duck around the sapphire curtain shading the doorway and into the morning sun—and into the backs of a massive crowd.

"Sorry," Hen says, slipping around two younger boys. I follow her between the richly dyed wrap dresses and gem-laden hair of Architects and Dreamwalkers, through a handful of sandy kilts and the dirt-streaked working slips of Gardeners and Weavers—lower magicians like me. It seems the entire town is converging on the shore for a glimpse of the priest and his magical boat. My bare feet press against polished brick as Hen guides us to a side street.

Not that it's much better. People cluster here, too, leaning over iron balconies to ask if the boat has arrived, placing bets on which Aterian contender will actually make a team. Our town has six of them, I think. The Mestrah declared that every upper-class Master aged sixteen to nineteen is eligible to contend, as they're in the prime of their magic and thus the heirs' strongest options. With just two moons of training left, Hen missed the cutoff by a hair.

Snippets of conversation flutter past me, and I hang hungrily on to their words.

"—thought the Mestrah was going to name Prince Kasta his heir," muses a man with rich brown skin and rings glittering across his fingers. "Strange the gods would call for a Crossing after so long. Do you think there's more to it?"

"—a human sacrifice! I thought we'd moved past that—"

“—really should clear these dirty peasants from the street,” complains a woman with porcelain skin and a gaudy gold headdress. “Why are they even here? None of this is for them.”

“Don’t worry,” Hen whispers when the woman curls her lip at me. “I have a lot of dirt on her. Want me to tell her husband about her boyfriend? Or her clients that she’s only been erasing half their wrinkles so they have to hire her again the next week?”

I gape at Hen. “How do you *know* these things?”

“It’s my business to know.”

“It’s your business to *design clothes*.”

A shrug. “Rich people like to talk. I like to listen.” She grins. “Hurry, we have to catch him before he gets to Numet’s temple. After that, the list will be much better guarded.”

Numet’s temple: the grandest of Atera’s three places of worship. I’d be suspicious of how she knows the priest’s schedule as well, but it only makes sense a priest would want to spend time honoring our sky goddess—the deity from which our Mestrahns are descended—before taking the long ride back to Juvel.

We navigate around the baker’s daughter pulling her cart of fresh breads, and past the Gemsmith’s shop, though the Gemsmith herself isn’t in—instead it’s her wife who nods to us over displays of gold chains and jeweled dragonflies. Down an alley choked with barrels we go, where the tantalizing smells of spiced onions and cooking fish drift. Finally we stumble onto an empty street where the upper district meets the lower, and the ground changes from paving stones to packed dirt. Children play at the corner where the houses meet the road, but everyone else must be clustered toward the shore.

We hurry to the end to watch the procession coming up the road. The priest and Royal Materialist are in front, flanked by their leopard-masked guards, and behind them, half the town. Maybe we *do* need to watch the woman. While the guards keep their gazes forward and stiff (though, who knows what they're looking at under those masks), her restless eyes shift to the streets and the celebratory flowers strung between buildings. As if she can sense Hen's irritation with her, her gaze suddenly moves to us.

"She knows," Hen says, crossing her arms. "Memorize this face, Galena. It'll be the last you see when the queen discovers you're a fraud."

"Keep your voice down," I say. "And your imaginary vendettas on hold. What do we do now?"

"How should I know? I'm just here to grab the ledger."

"All right, but I'm not used to this life of crime. Do I run at them like a religious fanatic? Scream in agony and pretend I broke my ankle?"

"Both good options. I'll see you in a few." She darts back the way we came.

"Wait!" I whisper. "Where are you going?"

And she's gone without an answer. Leaving the fate of the entire evening to me.

All right, Zahru, focus. If they were riding horses, I could have easily introduced myself as the town Whisperer and spent an excessive amount of time tending to their mounts. I could ask for the priest's blessing, but I think the guards would stop me before I could get close. They're almost here. Gods, maybe I *should* run out howling about my ankle.

I move for the street, imagining the look on my father's face when the priest's guards drag me home. *What am I always telling you, Zahru?* he'll say as the guards untie my hands. *You went in without a plan, didn't you?*

Yes, Fara. I went in without a plan.

"Are those lotus boots?" I shriek, praying the Royal Materialist is half as obsessed with going over the details of her work as a certain local one is. "Wait, you . . ." I put my hand to my heart. "You're Galena of Juvel."

The woman smiles. "Yes, I am."

"Move off," a guard snaps, shoving a spear at me.

"Oh, let the girl be," the woman says, beaming as she steps around him. "What's your name?"

Her tone is a little patronizing, but I have to say I'm impressed by her friendliness. "Zahru. I'm a huge fan of yours."

"Zahru, it's nice to meet you. I—"

"Galena," the priest grumbles.

"A minute, Mai. She's only a girl." She turns back to me, her pretty violet eyes—powdered with gold and lined with swirls of kohl—darting once down the plain linen of my dress to my bare feet. "You like fashion, Zahru?"

"Yes, *adel*. I know all about bronze eyelets and Luck shawls." Not a lie. I know too much about them, if she's really wondering.

"Another of my fine inventions. That Luck shawl got me this job." She winks, and over her shoulder I catch a flash of green.

"Where did you get the idea for the lotus boots?" I won't pretend I'm not fishing for an answer for Hen, and I think I see that green flash pause.

“On a summer walk under the stars. The palace has several beautiful pools covered with lotus flowers, and when I went wading, the idea came to me.”

A whisper that sounds very much like “Lies” drifts through the crowd.

“That seems like a perfectly reasonable explanation,” I say loudly.

“Did you know I’m from a town even smaller than Atera?” the woman continues, and now she has my true attention.

“You are?”

“My mother was a Materialist, but she passed when I was born. My father was a Gardener. Without her we had only his trade to live by, and I went many years of my life without any shoes at all.”

I swallow and scrunch my toes in the sand. This just got much more personal than I ever intended it to, and I know I said I’d side with Hen on pretty much anything, but she didn’t tell me Galena grew up without her mother, too.

“Here.” She begins unlacing her boots. The crowd gasps, and when I understand what she’s doing, my heart jerks. Oh gods, I hope Hen is finished—

“Take these,” she says, handing me the boots, which are several times more expensive than anything I will ever own. “And remember, no matter what you’re born to, you can be more.”

She smiles and starts off, and I can only stare after her, my heart like a dragonfly in my chest. I should probably be taking an important life lesson away from this about honesty and hard work, but all I can think of is how similar our stories are, and how she now travels on a glass boat at the side of a priest. It has to be a

sign. That I'm meant to do this, and everything will work out, and maybe it will be even more amazing than I first imagined.

It's only after the last guard has passed and the crowd wanders in, ogling the lotus boots and whispering, that I remember I'm on a mission. Someone asks to touch the shoes, and under normal circumstances I might have stayed and shared them, but now I clutch them to my chest and dash to the end of the street where I saw Hen disappear. My blood thrums through my body, fitful and restless. I pass through the alley and back into the upper district, around a corner—and right into the crossed arms of Hen.

"Gods!" I yelp, juggling the boots. "Hen! Did you get it?"

Her brown eyes narrow. "It's done."

I scream and throw my arms around her. I know exactly what she's going to say next, but I'm too thrilled to care. We're leaving. We're actually leaving Atera to go to the palace, where there are trees that bloom jewels and golden rooms as big as towns. We'll eat all the chocolate we can stomach. We'll trail mysterious strangers and find secret passages and witness at least one spectacular rescue, because in all of the travelers' best stories, someone is always saving *someone*.

And when we return, Hen and I will bring back with us a memory just like our mothers'. Maybe it'll be the last one we have before Hen leaves at harvest. *Or maybe*, I think, squeezing the boots, *it will be the first of many*.

"You are touching me with *her shoes*," Hen complains.

"Sorry," I say, pulling back. But I can't stop from grinning. "I did what the mission called for."

A sigh. "You were really very good."

“Convincing?”

“I suppose.” But even with her enemy’s contraband in my hands, she can’t stop a small smile. She gives my shoulders a shake.

“We’re going to the banquets.”

I let out another squeal, and this time she joins me.

“There’s just one thing left to do,” she says, a new gleam in her eyes.

“Don’t tell me you’re going after Galena *now*.”

“Oh, she’ll get hers, but there are more immediate needs at hand.” Her smile quirks. “It’s time for phase two.”

I blink. “There’s a phase two?”

“Yes. One your delicate conscience won’t be able to handle.” She smirks. “Say goodbye to your father, and I’ll find you as soon as I can.”

II

I'm very quiet as I slip in through the stable door. But as anxious as I am to admit to the man who raised me that I've turned into a petty con artist, my *fara* is not inside. The animals stir in their stalls; a camel chews noisily on her cud. My father must be in the pasture.

Gods, please let him give me his blessing.

I flex my grip on the small sack I'm holding and start down the aisle.

Fara's veterinary clinic is the biggest stable in town, not because we have the most money, but because we need the space. The Mestrah allows us free rent as long as we prioritize his soldiers' horses on the rare occasion they come through. Half the stalls are reserved for large animals like cattle, gazelles, and camels. We've converted the other half into keeps for small animals like cats, dogs, falcons—sometimes monkeys, when needed. Some of the animals simply need boarding while their owners travel, while others need medical care. Most of them have quite an opinion about being left here like, well, animals. But Fara is kind and patient, and I'd like to think I am, too, and after a day most of their complaints have subsided.

Twig girl, snorts a cow in the second stall. *This food. Bad.*

Except for the cows. Who seem to think they're entitled to royal treatment, and who find the stable and its caretakers infinitely lacking.

"I don't have time for you right now," I say. "It's fresh. Just eat what I gave you."

Sensitive thing, thinks her companion, eyeing me.

Human on bad food, too, remarks the first. *Can't make grain, can't make anything.*

I grit my teeth. "For the last time, you're on a *diet*. Your masters specifically told me not to give you honey."

The second snorts. *Always on diet when here. Food bad as chewed cud.*

"Oh, you ungrateful—"

"You know it's no use arguing," Fara says, squeezing in through the far doorway and making me jump. My father is dressed today in his usual working slip, a sandy fabric that nearly matches his skin in the mild winter months but is now several shades lighter than his summer tan. A herding dog wiggles in his arms, one leg wrapped in palm leaves where a salve covers a scorpion sting. The other three legs thrash when she sees me.

Human! Human human human, can I see her? Please please please! I need down. Down down!

She licks Fara's face with the last request, and he smiles and strokes her side. "Yes, you did very good. We'll go back outside again soon."

No, down! Human! Play! Play—cat? Cat! Cat cat!

My heart clenches as Fara lowers the dog into a converted stall. As with most magic in our world, his abilities have faded with age and use, the same way muscles weaken over time. Fara was lucky to make it twenty-nine years with his. That's the only advantage of the lesser magics: they take far less of a toll on our bodies, and so we can use them longer. But many would agree ten

years as Orkena's most powerful Firespinner far outshines thirty as Orkena's best Whisperer.

Two moons ago, Fara went deaf to the animals completely, and they stopped being able to understand him as well. And while it hasn't affected his medical expertise, he can no longer ask his patients what ails them or sense their fear, and so the weight of the stable has slowly shifted to me.

"You've been gone awhile," Fara says, wiping his hands on an old rag. "Was the market very busy?"

"I—yes," I say, hastily handing over the bag. "But I found everything we needed. I even got acacia and aloe. And that snake bite salve we liked so well."

Fara stares. "Zahru, that salve is expensive. We can make do with the honey poultice."

"It's all right. Hen covered it."

A small lie. The lotus boots covered it. Hen wanted me to get rid of them, so I did.

Fara tsks. "She shouldn't have. She and her mother have already done far too much for us."

This is the point where I should move on to the reason I splurged on so many fine medicines, but being the awkward and half-ashamed daughter I am, I just stand there while Fara takes the bag to the dusty cabinet. I'm still not sure how to tell him what I've done. Oddly it's not even the priest-conning part of it I'm worried about. It's that I can see how diligently he's working despite the excited shouts outside the stable; how focused he is even as the rest of Atera leaves their work to blow horns in the streets. He isn't even annoyed with it, just . . . accepting. To him, our place

is here, and the idea of me keeping company with Dreamwalkers and Airweavers is absurd at best. I couldn't stand to hear him say I don't belong with them at the palace.

But more than that, I don't want him to see how badly I want to leave.

"*Zahru*," Fara says in the tone he uses when he's been trying to get my attention for some time. He's holding a jar of numbing cream from the sack, another small treasure I splurged on.

"Yes?"

"Are you sad about Hen's invitation?"

My stomach clenches. I wasn't even sure he knew she'd been invited. "No. Well, I was at first, but then . . ."

"I'm sorry about it, too," Fara says, fidgeting with the cream. "I feel . . . it's my fault. If you had your mother's magic, maybe—"

"Fara!" My chest constricts, and I rush to him, shaken he believes *that's* the reason I'd be sad about not going. Fara has always taken pride in our abilities, even if our work is not as celebrated as others'. And it's not like he had any control over my fate—I inherited his Whisperer magic the same way I inherited my mother's fair skin and amber eyes.

"Don't say that," I say, leaning my head against his broad chest. "Our work is important, too."

He's quiet a moment, his hand warm on my back. Then he pulls me gently away and holds up the cream. "You're going to try to get in, aren't you?"

Heat flushes my neck. "I . . ."

"That was a very long hug, and these are a lot of expensive products."

How does he *do* that? “I was really close to telling you, I promise.”

“Zahru, what if you get caught?”

“Hen looked into it. They’ll just escort us out. It’s only bad if you try to sneak in as a contender.”

“And if you’re in Juvel? Will they send you home?”

“Hen will be with me the whole time. She’ll buy our passage back if they won’t return us.” I press my hands together. “Please, Fara? It’s just a night. I’ll be back in time for supper tomorrow, and then I’ll be here. Forever.” I don’t mean to say that last word aloud, or in the ominous tone a priest would use to impart a deadly omen, but Fara understands. He kisses my head and sighs.

“You are my world, *kar-a*. I want you to be safe.” His smile is sad. “I also want you to be happy. It’s only for a night? You’ll be protected?”

“They’ll have guards. And literally all of the country’s top magicians will be within a kilometer of us. If we’re not safe there, we’re not safe anywhere.”

A grunt. Leave it to my father to consider even that might not be enough. “All right. You have my blessing.”

I squeal and hug him again. “Thank you, Fara! I’ll bring you something from the royal city.”

He shakes his head. “Just bring *yourself* back.” He pauses to think. “Though I wouldn’t mind some chocolate, if you can manage it.”

I smile. “Of course.”

I help Fara put away the remaining salves, excitement bouncing through me. My fake name is on the ledger. I have Fara’s blessing—now I just need to hear from Hen. But just as I’m starting to worry that “phase two” will involve me negotiating

her release from jail, quick footsteps beat outside the stable, and she comes bouncing in.

“Zahru!” she wheezes.

She’s in a green *jole*, her arms bare and her deep beige skin glowing with pearl dust. Swirling golden circles—Numet’s symbol—curl around her bicep, and her short hair jingles with beads of gold and emeralds. She carries a bundle of garnet-red cloth wrapped over something that chimes as she moves.

“You look amazing,” I say.

“Storeroom!” she says, jogging past me without a glance.

“Is everything all right?”

“No time to chat. Phase two is complete, and they’re boarding the boat.”

She disappears behind the storage room’s tan curtain, and I nearly trip on the water jug as I hurry after her. “As in, boarding *now*?”

“Strip!”

“Has it been an hour already?” I pull my arms out of my sleeves and tug the slip off, while Hen sets the red bundle on a grain sack.

“Wait. How did phase two take *you* an hour?”

“Less talking, more dressing!” Hen gathers the red dress into a loop and gestures for me to raise my arms, then pushes the bundle over my head. The shining fabric spills down my body, flaring from red to gold with the light. It’s sleeveless like Hen’s, but the top gathers in the center instead of the side, forming rippling pleats that overlay the dress all the way to the floor.

“Hen, this is . . . stunning,” I say, looking over my shoulder. The back opens to the base of my spine, where fine chains connect the

fabric on either side. Hen flits behind me and mends a torn chain with a press of her fingers.

"It's boring, is what it is," she says. "But Mora wouldn't let me dress you in only river reeds, so this is what I have to work with."

"Is this fire silk?"

"Look straight ahead."

I do. Hen grabs one of the things that had been bundled in the dress—a thin brush and a jar of black pigment—and holds my jaw with her free hand. "Close your eyes."

"I already lined them," I say as the brush kisses my eyelid.

"Mm hmm."

The brush trails out to the edge of my eye and loops beside it.

"You better not be drawing anything gross."

Hen snickers.

"Hen!"

"I'm not!"

The brush retracts, then starts on my other eyelid.

"There's no phase three, right?" I ask. "Remember when I asked if I'd have to prove I was a Potionmaker? And you didn't answer?"

This side of my face doesn't get the same loop as the first. Hen has me look up and starts lining the bottom lid.

"The others had to prove their identities at the temple," she says. "We don't."

"What does that mean?" The brush lifts, and I open my eyes. "You . . . made a deal with someone?"

Hen considers this, a small smile in her lips. "Yes?"

"See, when you give me an answer that sounds like a question, it makes me think you're lying."

“When you ask me a question you already know the answer to, it makes me want to lie.”

“You blackmailed someone.”

Hen just grins and lets down my hair, threading crystals into the brown waves around my face, then lifts a delicate tangle of chains from the grain sack. It separates into three fine loops in her fingers, a garnet pendant dangling from the place they connect. A protection rune flashes from the gem’s face. I realize what it is just as she lowers it, and I grab her wrists.

“I can’t accept this,” I say.

“But it’s yours.”

“No, it was my mother’s, and now it’s *your* mother’s, after mine gave it to her on her *deathbed*.”

“Mora wants you to wear it.” She secures the last hairpin so the jewel dangles by my left eye, and starts taming flyaway stands of my hair. A new wave of appreciation for everything she’s done floods through me.

“I’ll take care of it,” I say.

“I know.”

She grabs my hand and tows me from the storage room. Fara turns from where he’s mixing a poultice, and smiles as he takes us in.

“You look royal, girls,” he says. “But is everything all right? Did I hear the boat is boarding *now*?”

“Yes, Fara, sorry,” I say, darting to peck his cheek. “I love you. See you tomorrow!”

“Love you, too,” he calls.

I think he might also say something about making good choices,

but we're already out the door, me holding a hand to my head chain and Hen holding her skirt. The desert sun burns hot on our shoulders.

"*Rie*," I swear. "I can't believe we're doing this. I can't believe we're actually going!" I laugh as we turn a corner, as fleet as antelope. "Can you even imagine what the *contenders* are going through? I'm nervous just to watch! I bet they'll be judged on their every move. One wrong smile and that's it, no eternal glory for them."

Hen shrugs. "But also no untimely death."

"Death?" We swerve to avoid a mother holding a baby. "The royal siblings aren't supposed to *kill* each other, are they?"

"Oh, no. But I've been reading all about past contests, and sometimes death just happened. Rogue assassins, hungry hyenas, starvation . . ."

My stomach tightens in pity. I guess I assumed royalty would have divine protection against such things, especially considering the way people have been celebrating the contenders all week. Everyone seems much more concerned with the prizes for being chosen: their name in history, a suite at the palace. I never stopped to consider why the prizes were so grand.

"Gods, and they're out there at least a week, right?"

"If they don't get hopelessly lost."

"That would be awful," I say as we cross into the upper district. The road ahead is packed with people, and Hen tugs me toward a gap at the side. "Can you imagine? Going through all this fuss and stress, just to get buried under a sandstorm?"

"Well, they *will* have spells and such. But just think." Hen's eyes

flash, and we press between a man in a brown tunic and a pigtailed girl. “If Gallus gets chosen, we can picture him being chased by all kinds of rabid things.”

I snicker at the thought of my ex pompously fighting a rattlesnake while trying to keep his hair perfect. “I hope something bites him in the rear while he’s sleeping.”

“I hope it bites him in the—”

“Shh,” I say, giggling and clasping my hand over her mouth. The ground under our feet has shifted from hot brick to cool wood. “You can’t say that here. At least wait until we’re on the boat.”

The mesh of people thickens as we excuse ourselves through, until it suddenly yields to the dock, a long structure of waterproof wood and iron posts, upon which ropes tether all sizes of boats to the shore. Guards stand in a wide semicircle around the priest and his assistants, giving them space. The nearest guard takes one look at our elaborate *joles* and nods us through. The crowd grumbles in envy. I admit the attention sends a shiver of satisfaction down my spine—I’m usually the one watching everyone else leave.

Galena stands at the base of a wide plank, and it takes me a moment to realize that plank doesn’t lead to the glass boat. It leads to one made of a strange wood instead, something swirled with black and golden tones that looks like an enormous version of the giraffe from Mora’s collection. A deep red canopy shades its deck, under which dozens of people mingle in their finest, their small crowns of gold and gemmed rings glinting like sparks in the sun. I recognize a young man who tutored Hen in writing, and the Gemsmith—no wonder her wife is tending her wares. The plank

to the glass boat is by the priest instead, blocked by a particularly burly guard.

The Mestrah must have sent one boat to carry spectators and another for the contenders. I'm slightly disappointed Hen and I won't be riding on glass, but honestly I'd be happy to take a leaky canoe at this point.

"Here's something we didn't think about," I mutter, looping my arm through Hen's. "The entire town is staring at us right now, including the Apothecarist I just bought salves from and your nemesis, who might remember *handing me her shoes* this morning. The punishment for getting caught is seriously 'go away,' right?"

"Don't worry. No one's going to recognize you. Your makeup has been done correctly for once."

I snort. "I can do my makeup correctly."

"Mm hmm." She adjusts her hair and smooths a pleat near my hip. "Like I said, they don't care about spectators. They only strip your name away and shame your family if you try to sneak in as a contender. So relax, you're wrinkling the silk."

I exhale, trying to draw on even a sliver of Hen's confidence. I don't need to be so nervous. This will either work or it won't, and if it doesn't, at least I will have tried. Maybe I'll even gain some semblance of infamy. I think I'd like people looking at me sidelong, worried I might do something unexpected and daring at any moment.

"Cutting it close, aren't we?" the priest says, his usual scowl in place. The words inked into his shoulders glisten with embedded gold. "Lucky for you, we're all happy to stand around in the heat while you decide whether you'll bother to show."

"Apologies, *adel*," Hen says, bowing with her arm over her chest. I do the same. "We lost track of time."

"Which of you is Hen, and which is Lia?"

"I'm Hen," Hen says.

Galena steps forward with a smile. She nods to me as well, but Hen must not be exaggerating about my makeup, because all Galena's gaze holds is curiosity, thank the gods. She's still shoeless, and I still have an undefinable urge to hug her.

"Hen, I'm Galena," she says, nodding in greeting.

"I know who you are," Hen says, crossing her arms. I clear my throat, and Hen mercifully says nothing more.

Galena raises a brow but gestures to the plank. "Would you come with me?"

I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from screaming *Yes!* I can't believe we did it. After the uncertainty of this week, after all our worrying, now we can finally relax. We're here. We're *here*, and with Hen having already done . . . whatever she did . . . to get our identities cleared, there are no more hurdles. We're going to the palace, and it'll be a night that's just ours; a treasure no one can take away.

A memory I can unfold anytime I'm missing her, and remember what we used to be.

We start for the plank—and the priest grabs my arm.

"Where do you think you're going?" he says.

My heart lurches. He knows. Gods, he knows, and of course he'd wait until the worst possible moment to reveal it—

"That boat's for the spectators," he says. "The contenders are over here."

III

For a moment, all the sound leaves the world. I'm sure I've misheard him. Or perhaps panicked my way into a subconscious state, where things mean the opposite of what they are.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I think you're confused."

His orange eyes narrow. This close up, I can see his pupils are slit like a cat's. "You are Lia, daughter of Rai?"

I swallow. "Yes."

"Then I think you need to learn to read. All elite Masters your age qualify for contention. It was written in the first line of your invitation."

The heat is like a fist around my throat. He thinks I'm a Master. I don't know how he could think that, but I have a dreadful, sinking feeling that Hen missed something when she added my name to the list.

"Is there a problem?" Hen says, popping up at my side.

"I've qualified for contention!" I say too joyfully. "Because I'm a Master. Isn't that great?"

All the confidence blanches from Hen's face. I'm not sure I've ever seen her afraid before, and it scares me more than what the priest is saying.

"Oh," she says weakly. "Because Lia was—" She coughs. "Are you sure? I'm really certain the invitation didn't say she was eligible."

Because Lia—my mother—was a Master. The heat pushes into my gut. Hen assured me they wouldn't look at the names again

this late in the process, but it seems very much like someone *did*, and sweat beads my neck as the priest checks the ledger.

"Hmm." He frowns. "Yes, there was something strange with your name. It was out of order, so it must have been added last minute. But my contact at the capital confirmed you're eligible. You must have gotten the wrong scroll." He mimes tossing a handful of confetti. "Sorry, surprise, and congratulations. Say goodbye, and let's go."

"Um, actually—" I start.

"She'll be right there!" Hen says before the priest can turn around.

"What are you doing?" I hiss as she pulls me aside. "We need to confess *now*. I can't be in the contention pool!"

"Do you remember when I mentioned eternal shame and your name being stripped for people who lie about being contenders?"

"Yes."

"That's what this is."

"That's not what this was *supposed* to be!"

"I know!" Hen pulls on the braids in her hair, eyes watering. If she cries, I will lose it entirely. "I'm sorry. Gods, I'm so sorry, I don't know what happened! Even if he checked your name, I thought— whoever looked at the records should have seen you were way too young to be your mother. End of story, you go on as a spectator. They must be so busy, they didn't look at her birthday—"

"What am I going to do?"

People are muttering and eyeing us. We're delaying too long, and now they aren't simply curious to see the boats off, but to see why this girl they don't recognize is holding up the glass boat. If I run, would they let me through?

"You can't run," Hen says, practically reading my mind. "I'm sorry, but you can't. Those guards will catch you in a second, and the contending families take this really seriously. If they think you're trying to sabotage their chances, they might hurt you, Zahru. They might hurt Fara."

"That's unsurprisingly not helpful!"

"I know! But listen, this can still be all right." She squeezes my shoulders, and I might've been encouraged by the calm settling over her face if I weren't imagining a mob descending on the stable. "I know this seems bad, but the proving part of the evening is done. The next step is the banquets. You know enough about potions to be passable, so as long as you're not bragging about it, you should be fine. And if you have to, faint. No heir's going to pick someone who can't even handle the stress of a banquet."

I exhale, trying to regain control of my nerves. Hen's right. No one has any reason to believe I'm not who I say I am, and the biggest danger now is actually being chosen for a team, for which my odds were low even if I *was* my mother. I can be a sparkling conversationalist. Then all I need to worry about is not drawing royal attention, and everything should be fine.

"All right," I say, swallowing. "Lie to people, faint if necessary. I can do that."

A tap on my shoulder makes me jump.

"Would you like me to announce you to the Mestrah as the reason we're late," the priest growls, "or would you like the chance to do it yourself?"

I turn at once. "Coming! Sorry."

I cast one more panicked look at Hen, who watches me with

something between guilt and helplessness, not even flinching when Galena touches her arm to guide her up the plank. The distance between us grows like a chasm. I know we're only going to be separated for a few hours, but this feels like a warning from the gods; a crack on the wrist for daring to want something above my station.

I move up the plank, feeling like I've crossed into the wrong side of a dream.

Hen watches me from the other side, her hands on the rail, reassurance in her eyes. The servants blow long, curved oxen horns, the sound vibrating through the glass in a dangerous hum, and the crowd bellows as the contenders cluster beside me on the rail. The boat shifts back from the shore. My home slides away bit by bit, faster and faster, and I'm even able to fake a smile and wave—until we slip past the rise where Fara's stable sits, and two familiar figures wave goodbye.



As the shoreline slips by, I think of Mora.

Hen's mother has many different strategies for dealing with stress. Some are as simple as a breathing exercise, and some involve plotting a cold revenge over many months until the customer who wronged her is sorry they ever lived. I've decided to employ my own strategy by embracing this as just another part of my tale. This is, after all, exactly the kind of unlucky circumstance that starts off the best of the travelers' stories, and just when it seems the hero is doomed to a tragic end, they're rescued by a brilliant twist of fate or gorgeous newcomer. I'd happily settle for being

rescued by Hen, though I wouldn't mind the gorgeous newcomer, either. I just need to let the tale play out as it will.

And so I've found a place along the rail, beneath the misting fabric of the blue canopy and out of the way of the contenders, where I can stand and take in everything I thought I'd only ever experience in dreams. The gentle sway of the boat, the feel of a river breeze in my hair. The smooth glass under my fingers, rippling with bursts of reflected sunlight. Fish dart beneath the deck like jewels, and crocodiles swim like black fissures, alive and incredible below my feet. Even the desert seems more mysterious and infinite here, its low plateaus stretching to the horizon in every direction. When we pass a town, people cluster the banks to shout wishes of luck. I can almost believe I'm supposed to be here.

There's just one problem Hen and I didn't account for. When I arrive at the palace, I'll be one of hundreds, easily lost in the crowd. But here, I'm one of *seven*. Which wouldn't concern me so much, if one of those seven wasn't Gallus.

"Something to drink, *adel?*" a servant asks, offering me a tray bearing a single bronze chalice.

"Yes, thank you," I say, admiring the tiny white flowers on its surface. It smells like vanilla, and I'm taking a sip when the servant adds, "The boy in green wanted you to know he sent me."

And thus ends my happy time alone. But I knew I wouldn't be able to go the whole evening without speaking to anyone, and it *would* be good to get in some practice as my alter ego before I have to face one of the heirs. I scan the deck for the boy in green, looking past a petite girl with russet-brown skin and a pale, rosy-cheeked boy at the rail, past a silver-haired girl who stands at the

prow, and finally risk a glance at the two boys sitting with Gallus on the benches. I'm snickering that one of his friends thinks I'm worthy of a drink when I realize the boy in green *is* Gallus, and I spit the juice over the rail. Gods, I can't believe that's still his move, or that this is the second time he's used it on me. I slam the drink back on the tray.

"Sorry. Can you tell him I'm not interested? And maybe that I have a contagious disease?"

The servant's eyes widen. "A contagious disease?"

"Like heatstrain. Or magipox. Oh! Or moldmouth!"

Her eyes shift to the drink I put back. "Of—of course, *adel* . . ."

Except it's too late. Gallus has pushed to his feet, obviously confused as to how anyone could resist his charms, and is making his way over. I pray to every god I can think of that his friends will laugh and call him back, or maybe the boat will capsize, but the gods must not be on speaking terms with me right now, because he keeps coming, unhindered.

This is not how this was supposed to happen. I've made it five moons pretending Gallus never existed, and I'd planned to go the rest of my life without talking to him again. Well, maybe not *ever* again, but definitely not until I'd done something fantastic and memorable, like this very event, after which I'd show up at his house and throw a cup of wine in his face, because that's what important people do to people who told them they're worthless.

I mean, Gallus didn't use that word exactly. But he said he needed to get "serious" and invest himself in relationships with marriageable women, by which he means girls who have

interesting futures and “real” magic. And certainly not girls who thought that’s what they had until he told them they didn’t.

“I don’t know what you’ve heard about me,” Gallus says, swaggering to the rail. “But honestly, I just wanted to invite you to sit—”

I pull away and start for the front of the boat. The other two boys watch me, amused.

“Hey,” Gallus says.

I keep moving. Gallus clearly doesn’t recognize me under all this makeup—he’d have a lot more to say if he did—and if I can make it to the silver-haired girl, maybe we can form an instant and intimidating alliance that will scare Gallus off for good. Considering what could happen to me if I’m caught, I don’t *think* Gallus would go so low as to reveal me to the priest, but I’ve been wrong about him before.

“Wait, were you at Kay’s last night?” Gallus says, jogging to my side. “I feel like I’d remember you, but if I was a jerk or something . . .”

I imagine he’s talking about some upper district party, and the urge to tell him yes, he’s a jerk always, dances at the tip of my tongue. Gods, will anyone notice if I jump over the side? I bite the edge of my thumb, reasoning that at least revealing my identity that way would mean not having this conversation, when Gallus pulls my hand from my mouth.

“*Zahru?*” he whispers.

He looks stricken, and I know it has nothing to do with the embarrassment of sending me a drink. But maybe I think more clearly with a dose of panic in my veins, because I suddenly

determine I'm not going to let him be the one who ruins this. After all, *he* doesn't know I'm not a Master yet, or that I didn't get an invitation on some miraculous recommendation. And in actuality this is the perfect comeback for how he broke things off, because I'm definitely the last person he thought he'd see here.

"Oh," I say, barely glancing up. "Hello. Whatever your name is."

"Zahru, you know who I am. What are you doing here?"

He pulls me to the side, out of earshot of the others, which I have to say is a relief. At least he hasn't totally transformed into a self-righteous snob.

"Oh, you know," I say. "Just checking out the competition."

"What? *How?*" I might have been offended if I wasn't drawing so much pleasure from the shock on his face. "No, it has to be a mistake. Does the priest know you're only a Whisperer?"

"Don't be a cod," I say, like my heart isn't hammering in my chest. "Of course he knows."

"And you still came? Did you even think this through?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"This isn't one of your little fantasies, Zahru. The desert is dangerous. There are sandstorms, thieves, wild animals . . ."

If only I could believe his concern was for me and not what I lack. "And I don't stand a chance out there with all you 'real' magicians, right?"

"I'm serious. Just because we aren't—" He looks past me, and my heart jerks with the hope that maybe being away from me has been hard for him, too, when he lowers his voice and I realize he's just making sure no one else is listening. "Just because we aren't together doesn't mean I don't care about you."

My heart pinches. “Don’t say that too loud. Your friends might hear.”

“Zahru—”

“Anyway, as flattered as I am that you think I could be chosen, you don’t have to worry about it. I know I don’t stand a chance. I just want to see the palace.”

“Ah.”

I know he’s itching to say he never thought I’d be chosen. Gallus never could resist an opportunity to lecture me about how naïve my dreams are, but he must have decided it’s not worth pursuing, because he stays silent. I really want to leave it at this and let us devolve into awkward silence, but it’s just occurred to me I can’t have him going back to his friends and telling them who I am. If my real name circulates, the priest might decide he’s irritated enough to look into it.

“And stop calling me Zahru,” I whisper, eyeing said priest, who sits with his servants in the clear glass cabin. “I go by Lia now.”

“Ah,” he says again, understanding washing over his face. He presses his hand over his eyes, and exhales. “This is one of Hen’s schemes.”

“Yes, and you absolutely can’t tell anyone about this, Gallus. I’m serious. They could whip me in the square, or lock Fara and me in prison, or . . . or worse!”

“So you *do* sometimes think of consequences.”

“Of course I do! This wasn’t supposed to go this way. Hen was trying to get me in with the spectators. But we used my mother’s name, and they didn’t check the dates . . .”

Gallus sighs, and I wish I could take the relief on his face as

him knowing how to help me, but I know he's just glad he's made sense of how a Whisperer is at his level. He leans casually against the rail, his swagger returned with his control of the situation.

"I'm happy to do that for you," he says, his tone genuine. "Really. Just relax, be elusive if the heirs ask you questions, and this could be a great night for you."

"Thank you," I say, which is all I can manage with that kind of advice. But I am grateful he'll keep my secret, so I hold back any other retorts.

The water laps against the boat. A pair of spotted geese cackle at each other near the shore, and for reasons I don't understand, Gallus stays by my side.

"You look nice, by the way," he says.

I force a smile and study my hands. I hope he's not waiting for a compliment in return, because that's more than I'm capable of at the moment.

"Sorry I panicked there," he says, shifting. "It's just . . . the competition is really stiff for these positions. That goes for me, too. The chances of being chosen . . ."

"You'll do fine," I say, sighing. I hate that I know him well enough to know he's nervous, and even more that I can't stand to see him that way. "You're talented and smart. If the heirs are looking for a Firespinner, you're the best option they have."

He looks over. I keep my eyes on the bank, but from the corner of my vision I see him smile.

"Thank you," he says. "You know, I never meant to hurt you. It's just . . . you knew we had to grow up sometime, right?"

I push back from the rail. "I have to go."

He nods, slowly. "All right. It was good to see you."

I turn, exhaling. If I survived *that*, maybe I really will be fine tonight. I'm starting toward the prow and the silver-haired girl when Gallus calls out again.

"Er, Lia?"

I stiffen but look over my shoulder. Standing there in his finest, I can almost remember him framed in the light of the stable door, breathless from running, from his impatience to see me.

"Maybe don't talk to anyone tonight," he says.

"That's very supportive. Thank you."

"I just mean . . . you know. Too candidly? Don't tell the princess you thought she'd be more mystical or something."

He may have a point, but coming from Gallus it only reminds me of the many ways in which he finds me lacking, and my bruised heart aches with believing that maybe he's right. *What a desperate move*, his eyes seem to say. *How sad she still can't accept her place*. But I've already wasted enough time fretting about what Gallus thinks, and I bury the bruise deeper and pretend again there was never anything between us. Today I am a Potionmaker and one of Orkena's elite, and no condescending Firespinner is going to ruin this night for me.

I square my shoulders and move on.

Gallus is soon shoved from my mind when I notice the others pointing at something I can't see at the front of the boat. Sometime during that conversation we entered the royal city, for people cluster the riverbanks now in the finest attire I've ever seen: gossamer shawls and crowns of red ivy; gold bangles and bright silks dripping with crystal. Shining collars flash from the necks

of dogs and cats, and beyond them white-sand estates tower like thunderclouds, their iron balconies framing potted palms and flowering trees. Then we float around a bend, and I'm not the only one who gasps.

It's like spending your whole life knowing only candlelight, then looking upon your first wildfire. The royal palace is a sprawling giant against the sunset. Pale and tall, its many stone spires are the carved bodies of the gods: Numet's fiery torch juts above the palace's center, her eyes windows to the east; her brother Rie, the god of death, guards the west, his great wings folded. The nine lesser gods stand around them, gilded in real jewels. Apos, god of deceit; Rachella, goddess of love. Oka, Valen, and Sabil, gods of judgment, fate, and magic. Talqo, Aquila, and Tyda, goddesses of healing, learning, and patience. Brazen Cybil, goddess of war. Her falcon companion sits upon her gloved hand, wings stretched—his metal feathers are the same our soldiers wear on their armor.

Gold shines along the edges of the perimeter wall, and as our boat draws near, the protection spells carved into the wall hum and glow. A square tunnel rumbles open before us. Down a long, narrow passage we float, until we finally emerge within a grand indoor dock glittering with torches. A tiled shaft of porcelain and gold guides us between breathtaking trees with small, ruby-red leaves and brilliant white flowers, to a redwood platform flanked by guards. There are more plants in this entire enclosed dock than I've ever seen outside.

I'm so busy trying to take it all in, I don't notice the wall has slid shut behind us until a loud *boom* shakes me from my stupor.

The wooden boat did not follow. The spectators are going to a different dock.

Breathe, Zahru, I think as our boat slides to a stop. Now you just need to blend in.

“Welcome to Juvel,” the priest says as the contenders jostle toward the plank. I linger toward the back, grateful even Gallus is too preoccupied to notice I’m here. “This way, please. And be quick about it—*someone* has us running behind.”

His orange eyes lock on me, and I quickly find a point in the distance to focus on as everyone looks over their shoulders. So much for blending in. But soon we’re moving again, and the contenders are nervously practicing small, complicated tricks that might prove their control and give them an edge. A boy curls a visible ball of wind above his palm; the silver-haired girl freezes her breath into an icy knife. I try not to watch with too much wonder, but aside from my time with Gallus, I don’t often get to see higher magics at work. Anyone at this skill level leaves Atera soon after they master their craft. They are our soldiers and architects, palace entertainers and protectors. I can’t help but find what they do beautiful.

When I catch myself watching Gallus shift a flame from blue to white, I turn my attention to the garden.

“This is how the evening will go,” the priest says as we step between two of the strange trees and into a tall, triangular hallway. “You’ll attend three banquets, one for each heir. As the eldest, Prince Kasta has priority in who he picks, so you will meet with him first. Once he chooses his escort, the rest of you will be taken to meet Prince Jet, and lastly Princess Sakira.”

“One escort?” I whisper, a little too hopefully. I thought each

heir was supposed to have two, but if they've changed it, I'm liking my chances for surviving this even more.

"The second is always a Healer," the silver-haired girl whispers, with a kind smile that makes me regret not talking to her sooner. "They're chosen in a different ceremony."

"Thanks," I say.

"If you're selected," the priest says, casting me a warning glance, "your name will be announced to the spectators, and you'll be prepared for the race. You'll meet the Mestrah first, who may award your team the advantage of starting with the sacrifice if he believes your pairing to be the strongest. Those of you who are not chosen by the end of the evening will be dismissed to enjoy the rest of the night. Just remember the boats depart exactly one hour after the festivities tomorrow, and if you're not on them, you'll be finding your own way home."

Of course he's looking at me for that last line.

"And do the heirs pick the sacrifice as well?" says the petite girl. All remaining whispers fall silent. The priest's lips twitch.

"That choice is for the gods to make, not our esteemed heirs. In prior contests, it has always been one of the Forsaken, so there is no need to concern yourselves."

Murmurs ripple through the group, and my chest twinges. The Forsaken are those who were born in Orkena without magic—an indication of the gods' disapproval. It's a rare occurrence in a country brimming with magical blood, but any child who fails to show aptitude by age eleven must report to a dedicated orphanage, where they stay until they reach sixteen summers. After that, they'll have to decide whether to risk crossing the desert to start

a life elsewhere, or attempt to find work in Orkenā. Some will find kindness in the outlying towns, from people like Fara and me who know them to be as capable as anyone else. But many Orkenians believe Forsaken incompetent or unclean, and some towns—like the capital—won't employ them at all. And even though I know this is what the gods demand, it still seems unfair a person who's already lost so much should have to literally lose their life, too.

The priest scans the contenders for further questions, but an uncomfortable energy pulses around us now, and when no one else speaks, he continues.

"You'll have a moment to compose yourselves in this next room before being introduced to Prince Kasta. He may ask you a question or two. Then he'll either dismiss you to enjoy refreshments or ask you to sit at the royal table. You can imagine which is the more ideal outcome."

"Are our chances gone if we're dismissed?" asks one of Gallus's friends.

"Not entirely. The prince can send for you at any time and will likely sift through many contenders before coming to a final decision."

Gallus clears his throat. "But he can choose an escort whenever he wants, yes?"

We all know what the priest is really saying. If we aren't chosen to sit at the table, we're basically just there to eat the food.

"Yes," the priest says, not kindly. "The whole point of the evening is to select Orkenā's best magicians. The strongest will be picked. The rest of you will go home. I suggest you make a good

first impression.” He raises his voice. “Any other questions?”

No one with the fear of the gods in their heart would dare ask something else. The priest smirks, satisfied, and we move down the hallway again, the only sound our sandaled feet on the stone.

Soon we enter a much smaller room, though by much smaller, I mean it’s the size of Fara’s entire stable. It has no windows and only a single plant in each corner, potted versions of the grasses from the dock. I imagine the room would be loud and overflowing with hopefuls if we hadn’t been late—there must be a few hundred in the next room if our small town alone sent seven. Now only two contenders wait by the room’s other door, a girl holding a blooming rose and a boy who stands head and shoulders above everyone else. An old woman fusses over the girl’s hair as a guard ushers the boy through the exit. His name—Marcus, son of Bernab—is announced in the next room, and a burst of nerves simmers under my skin. It’s just occurred to me I’m about to speak to the Mestrah’s children, who, with traces of Numet’s blood in their veins, are the closest I’ll ever get to the gods. Prince Kasta won’t rise into divinity unless he wins the Crossing, of course, but I’m unreasonably panicked he’ll have some innate sense for detecting liars.

But I can hardly decide what to do about that when ten servants stream into the room, one brushing a streak of dust from Gallus’s tunic, another fixing a lily in a girl’s hair. A third attacks my face with cotton and some kind of powder. While she’s distracting me, another servant dusts my shoulders and chest with flecks of gold, and before I can ask if it’s real, the servant in front of me grabs the jewel of my head chain.

"No!" I say as she moves to straighten it. "I want it like that. It's the style."

The servant stares at me, probably waiting for me to admit I'm joking, then shrugs and moves on to the next person.

"This one next," the old woman croaks, pulling Gallus to the front of the line. At some point in the chaos, the girl she was helping must have been called in. Gallus fidgets with his tunic, but with his square shoulders and proud chin, he already looks like he belongs at royalty's side. If he hadn't told me earlier I'm better off not speaking, I might have reassured him he'd be fine. The old woman sends him through the gold-plated doorway with an impatient flick of her wrist.

"Gallus, son of Bomani," comes the announcement on the other side of the wall.

"You, back of line," the old woman barks at me.

Well then.

I sway behind the others, rising up on my toes, trying to see around the white curtain separating our room from the party. Gallus has not been in there very long before the petite girl is called. A few more minutes, and the silver-haired girl steps through. Then a boy with sparks between his fingers. Then the first of Gallus's friends, then the second, and then I'm standing before the old woman, who straightens the top of my dress and brushes something off my chin with her finger before going for the jewel on the head chain.

"No," I say, jerking back. "That's how I want it."

"You look a fool," she snaps. "I fix it."

"Don't fix it, just leave it!"

She grabs for the gem again. "Let me fix!"

"This is the style!" I yell, breaking away from her.

"You think I don't know the style?" She reddens, her hands curling into fists. "I dress nobles for ages, girl. Before you were even a thought in your mother's head—"

"Panya," says a man, now peering around the curtain. "The next one, please."

The old woman huffs, jerking a hand toward the door like she wishes she was slapping my face instead. She *still* jumps for the chain when I speed past, but I'm onto her, and I dodge around her and through the curtain.

Into the party room.

Where everyone is looking my way: the contenders dipping fruits into chocolate, the harpist playing by the fountain, the entirety of Orkena's elite crowded on the balconies above.

And Prince Kasta, who stands only a few paces away, his gaze sharp and annoyed.

IV

I've never met royalty before. I'm expecting Prince Kasta to glow, or levitate, or to literally hum with power as the travelers' stories claim princes do. I'm relieved he has normal eyes—a deep blue, not mirrors that can look into my soul—and slightly disappointed his olive skin has no hint of inner sunlight. But for what he lacks in otherworldliness, he more than makes up for in looks. Hen did not prepare me for this. She told me Prince Kasta was the hardest to get information on, that he kept to himself and was very studious. Even his Deathbringer magic, as feared as it is, doesn't require more effort from him than simply touching whatever he wishes to weaken. Thus whenever Hen spoke of him, I pictured someone who spent a lot of time sitting down.

Prince Kasta clearly does not. He's tall and fit, his arms toned and strong, his black hair curling at his ears in the preferred style of soldiers. Kohl lines his eyes, enhancing their blue. A garnet-red sash drapes the shoulder of his white tunic, and a belt of golden rattlesnakes twists about his waist, their eyes glittering black jewels. The serpents of Valen, god of fate and fortune. More of the snakes crown his hair.

I worry I'll answer any question he asks with “yes,” and remind myself I absolutely cannot survive the desert, even if he'd be at my side, even if I could watch him protect me with those arms . . . even if we'd be sharing a tent.

Gods, please let me answer his questions normally.

“Lia, daughter of Rai,” says the announcer.

Murmuring resumes in the room. I at least have the sense to bow, though the prince barely inclines his chin in response.

"You're dismissed," he says, and looks past me. "Is that everyone?"

That's it. When I tell this story to people, and they hungrily ask what sparkling wisdom the prince imparted, I'll have two words for them. Obviously this is what I wanted, but I suddenly feel insulted.

"Yes, *adera*," the announcer says.

Without another word, the prince leaves for the rosewood table, where of course Gallus is sitting with three others. I have half a mind to loudly explain it doesn't matter because that was the reaction I wanted anyway, and I'm only here for the chocolate, but the man at the curtain must see the storm brewing in my face, because his hand locks around my arm.

"He didn't even ask me a question," I say.

"It is best to leave the prince to his methods," he hisses, towing me toward the fountain. I puff my bangs out of my eyes and let him take me, reminding myself it doesn't matter what Prince Kasta thinks, and that truly was the best-case scenario, in which I didn't even have a chance to reveal myself. I glance up at the balconies, hoping to see Hen's approving face, but spectators crowd the marble railings and jostle the grim-faced guards, a constant shuffle of bright dresses and glimmering headpieces. There are just too many people. I'm going to have to trust she's there and move on before someone asks why I'm gawking like a commoner.

Luckily there is plenty else to move on to. Now that I've survived the first prince, my tension drains as I take in walls

embedded with gemstones and giant white pillars carved like palm trees. There is so much *color*. In everyone's dresses and tunics, of course, vibrant shades of red and orange and green, but also in the real sapphires rimming the fountain and the elegant crane curled around the cascade of water, its feathers painted all hues of purple and blue. Flecks of crystal shine in the floor, and torches hang like stars from the ceiling, bathing everyone in a warm, vibrant glow.

Oh yes. This will be a proper story yet, judgmental princes aside.

And the *food*. I don't know if it's more impressive because there's so much of it or because I don't know what half of it is. Two long golden tables are cluttered with platters of steaming meats, white cauldrons of soup, trays of puffed breads, cups brimming with butterscotch candies, and chocolate cakes topped in fruit. I need to find someone to identify it all. Hen will want details.

"Did *you* get asked a question?" I ask a boy who's twisting a slice of melon through a creamy dip. He looks at me like I asked if he'd like to contract an embarrassing rash and scuttles away.

I guess I know why he isn't sitting at the rosewood table.

A brunette in a peach *jole*, thumbing a gold bracelet around her bicep, approaches the cakes. I decide the rare dye of her dress and the sapphires in her hair mean she knows something about palace food.

"Do you know what those are?" I ask.

"Strawberries, raspberries, lemon," she says, pointing to the different cake toppings. She selects a raspberry slice and turns away.

“Wait!” I say. “What about the rest?”

“The rest of what?”

It dawns on me that my next request is slightly unreasonable.
“Um. Everything.”

She looks down the tables—which stretch the entire side of the room—and smiles.

“Ask a servant. That’s what they’re here for.”

She leaves for the couches on the other side. Everyone else has collected into groups now, laughing and talking with the familiarity of people who know one another. A girl in purple toasts her friends by the fountain; a group on a couch roars in laughter at a story a huge young man is telling. Gallus is still sitting at the rosewood table, now holding a bright flame in his palm, and for a moment I wish he didn’t have to be so important or overbearing, because he probably knows what all this food is. But Prince Kasta is watching him in his regal princely fashion, and I concede that asking a servant really would be best and grab a strawberry-topped cake on my way to find one.

I’ve only had chocolate one other time in my life, when one of Fara’s richest clients traded it as payment for boarding his stallion. This is something else. This is like drifting through delicious, bittersweet clouds and being kissed by a god who has sugary strawberry lips while someone else massages your shoulders and whispers how perfect you are in your ear. I could die right now and have no regrets.

I swallow the rest of the cake in two bites, smiling at myself, and approach a guard.

“Excuse me,” I say. “Can you explain all of this food to me?”

The guard gives me a very condescending look, considering that, for the night, I outrank him as the heirs' guest. His black hair is shaved close, and his armor reflects slips of torchlight along his dark brown skin, one hand resting atop the curved sword at his hip. Its ivory scabbard seems a strange treasure for a guard who looks my age. I thought only officers carried such swords, but maybe he just looks younger than he is.

"Shouldn't you be more worried about looking like you have *any* interest in the prince?" he asks.

"Oh, I'm not here to be an escort," I explain.

He scoffs. "What, you're just here for the cake?"

It does sound bad when he puts it like that. I bite my lip, trying to think of another way to phrase it.

"That was a joke," he says. "But now I'm concerned it's true."

"It's halfway true. I'm also here to see the palace."

"But not the prince."

"Right."

A smile slides onto his face, and though I usually prefer boys of Kasta's height to the guard's stockier build, there's something magnetic in the warmth he radiates.

"You want me to tell you about the food," he says.

"Yes, please."

He scrutinizes me, opens his mouth in what I fear will be a *no*, then shrugs and starts for the tables. "All right."

I shoot another glance at the rosewood table to check on Gallus. He's now one of two sitting with the prince, though his smile is gone, and the room looks emptier in general. I thought there were six people playing cards and crystals on the couches—now there

are three. Both girls who'd been sitting on the fountain when I walked in are gone. A few still wander the food, and a short boy sways before the harp.

"I thought we were allowed to enjoy the party until he chose someone," I say. "Is he sending people out?"

The guard sneers. "Well, since you've already declared you're not here for *him* . . . you should know His Illustriousness doesn't like crowds, remembering names, or treating others with basic human decency. Kindness is hard for him. So yes, about five minutes ago, he started clearing out everyone he's deemed useless."

My jaw drops as we pass a white-robed servant. I would worry this means the prince still thinks I could be *useful*, but after our first meeting, I'm fairly confident I can be dismissed again with little effort. "You can say that? Aren't you afraid someone will hear?"

"On the contrary," he says, giving me a smile I'm growing fonder of by the minute. "I hope they do."

Hen will be in Paradise when I tell her about the unrest between the eldest prince and his guards. At the table, a new girl in sunrise yellow sits with Gallus, one of the three who was playing cards a moment ago. The prince looks over her shoulder.

Right at me.

And like I was the one who spoke ill of him, my face grows hot.

"So, the food," I say, turning away.

"The food." The guard pauses at the end of the first table. "*Kryderi* soup. Rune soup. *Manne* and lentil soups."

The last two I'm familiar with, having made them with Fara. "Rune soup?"

"A recipe from our sister country Nadessa. It's made with

something called ‘cucumbers.’ The Mestrah imports them.”

“I’ve heard of Nadessa,” I say, grabbing a shallow bowl and scooping some of the green liquid into it. “They have palaces made of ice and birds that grant wishes.”

The guard snickers. “You don’t know what rune soup is, but you know all about another country?”

He’s certainly cheeky for a palace guard. I decide his mouth is what landed him a night guarding a party instead of watching the north desert for threats.

“I don’t know *all about* Nadessa,” I say. “But I know some things, yes.”

“How? Have you been there?”

His expression is disturbingly close to what I must look like when a traveler stops in from a new place. Hungry for the story, hungry for details. Hungry for a world that’s not my own.

“No,” I say. “But I hear the travelers speak of it at my—er, my friend’s stable.”

“What do they say? Tell me one of their stories.”

I suppose palace guards don’t have the chance to get out in the world any more than I do. I lift the spoon to my lips, pondering which story to tell him, and am entirely unprepared for the frigid, sweet liquid that follows. “Ugh, is it supposed to be cold?”

A laugh. “Yes.”

“This is terrible!”

I say this louder than I should in a room that’s rapidly declining in population. And of course Prince Kasta is looking at me when I glance over. I fake a smile and force myself to take another spoonful of gross, cold slime, hoping he’ll think I was reacting to

something other than the soup. I'm finding I don't want to be sent out just yet. I still have fifty food names to memorize, and I'd love to figure out what issue this guard has with his potential king.

The guard sees the prince watching, and his smile fades.

"Forgive me," he says. "I'm getting distracted. Behind the soups we have *citron*"—he points to a platter of fish and lemon slices—"freya bread"—a loaf covered in tiny seeds—"and *osta-fel*. It's a soft cheese made of buffalo milk. You eat it with crackers or the bread."

"Cheese?" I haven't heard of buffalo, either, and after the cold soup, am less eager to try something new.

"You've never had cheese?" The guard's gaze flickers to the jewel dangling by my eye, and then—rather boldly—down the red of my dress. "You said your friend owns a stable? Surely cheese and milk would be one of their most profitable trades?"

He assumes "my friend" owns livestock, as true nobles would. I'm wondering how I'm going to dig myself out of this one when a shriek sounds from the rosewood table. The spectators go silent. The guard's hand snaps to his sword, but two of the bigger, shirtless guards are already on the scene, each clasp ing an arm of the girl in yellow. Everything within a short radius of her trembles, cups and plates lifting into the air.

"No!" she yells. "I was made for this. I've studied war, I know how to survive the desert! You cannot possibly be so set on Atera trash." She jerks her head at Gallus, whose eyebrows rise. I admit I feel a pang of satisfaction at this—at someone considering *him* to be beneath them. "You need someone with true power. Who can do more than conjure what the Forsaken could with two sticks!"

The guards tug her closer to the room we entered from, and the girl thrashes in their arms. Cups crack and shatter, spilling wine onto the tile. "I was born to be remembered! I was born to be *yours!*"

The guards pull the girl from the room. The curtain smashes to the floor behind them and a crack splits up the wall, but the vibrations soften as her angry sobs drift farther away. The spectators burst into conversation, and this time I catch a flash of bronze from the balcony. *Hen!* She's moving a serving tray to catch the torches, and clasps a fist in victory when I see her. Followed by the quick motion of her hand across her neck and a gesture toward the door. I nod. It *is* time to see about getting dismissed, before the prince sends out so many I'm the only option left.

"Well," I say, setting my plate aside. "Safe to say he dodged an arrow with that one."

The guard grunts. "That would be assuming *he* wasn't the arrow." He glances at me. "Will you think me overly cruel if I say those he dismisses are the lucky ones?"

I pause in moving toward the table, a shiver running up my spine as I consider that the guard isn't talking about the contest and its challenges. In the travelers' tales, the mysterious prince isn't always quiet because he's shy. Sometimes he's quiet because he's hiding a side of him he doesn't want others to see.

"Is he really so bad?" I ask as the prince turns back to Gallus. "He's a little curt, I guess, but I would be, too, if my future rested on the shoulders of whoever I picked tonight. He handled that outburst quite well, I think."

"Handled it well?" The guard chuckles. "That would be the first time my brother handled—"

He covers his mouth and closes his eyes. My heart jerks into my throat. Brother?

Brother?

I search the room for the other guards, but none of them are dressed nearly as fine; they wear the traditional servants' garb of white tunics or *tergus* kilts, many shirtless, none in armor. Of all the people I could have asked for help, *why* did I choose the one with the ivory scabbard? I look in shock toward the balcony, where Hen is shaking her head. She wasn't telling me to get dismissed. She was telling me to *stop flirting with the second prince*.

Specifically Prince Jet: middle heir, Soundbender, and master swordsman of Orkena.

"Oh gods," I say. "I am so sorry, *aera*, to have wasted your time—"

"Please, don't," Jet says. "Leave that title for him. I wouldn't even be a part of this contest, except—"

A hush falls over the room. Prince Kasta has risen from his seat, his eyes locked on his brother's. And whether it's Jet's warnings or the strained quiet that simmers between them, the smile on his face looks suddenly predatory.

His blue eyes shift to me, and he starts toward us.

"My apologies," Jet says. "I should have been forthright with who I was. I should have directed you to a servant. He's going to disqualify you for talking to me out of turn."

It takes everything I have to keep from exhaling in relief. Thank the gods. Now I can join Hen and we can laugh at how close I was to sabotaging myself and enjoy the rest of the night without another care.

Though I can't deny part of me wishes this conversation didn't have to end—a dangerous thought indeed.

"It's no matter," I say, forcing a smile. "I wasn't here for that anyway. Thank you for your help."

"It was my pleasure . . . sorry, did you ever say your name?"

"It's—Lia," I say, bowing.

"Lia. Perhaps I'll see you tomorrow before you head home. You can tell me what you know of Nadessa."

He bows in turn, which I find so strange and flattering that I bow again, my heart soaring at his words. Maybe I chose poorly in who I talked to, but I spoke with a *prince*, for more than two words this time, who also wants to speak with me again. And there's still an entire night to come.

"Well," says a quiet voice behind me. "Isn't this a surprise." I feel the heat of Prince Kasta on my shoulder before I turn to look at him. "Remind me, Jet: weren't your exact words for tonight 'a gagging group of desperate, power-crazed street rats' you had no interest taking part in?"

Jet straightens, a muscle twitching in his jaw. "It was an exaggeration to avoid attending."

"Yet here you are. You must have found someone who's changed your mind." Kasta's gaze shifts to me, his eyes calm and beautiful and unnerving. "Interesting."

"Don't take this out on her," Jet says. "Name your First and be done with it. Save your vengeance for the race."

Kasta sighs. "I suppose you're right. I've delayed long enough."

He asks for my hand and I give it, again wondering if being

royal will mean his skin feels like warm silk, but . . . it's cold. Cold and rough. I may have to exaggerate some of these details when I tell this story. Kasta squeezes my fingers in dismissal, and I'm dipping my head to thank him when he steps to my side, raises our hands, and announces, "I have chosen my escort."