Chapter One

Tessa

The hardest part of this job isn't the stealing. It's the escaping. At best, it takes me two minutes to scale the wall out of the Royal Sector, but the night is cold, and my fingers are starting to go numb. Dawn is only an hour off, and sentry spotlights slide along the high stone walls at irregular intervals. I clutch my father's old apothecary pack tight under my arm, clinging to the darkness, waiting for an opportunity.

Several of the sectors have electricity in the wealthy areas, or so I've heard, but the spotlights here are brighter than any candle has ever been—even brighter than the bonfires the towns light to burn their dead. The first time I saw them, I stared like a fool until I realized those lights meant danger. I spent days trying to figure out some kind of pattern to the surveillance, until I admitted that to Weston. He snorted and said there was no pattern, just bored men spinning a light around a pole.

They've been spinning this light pretty steadily for the last hour.

I flex my fingers and mentally adjust my estimate to three minutes—then bite my lip and think. The light has been returning to this section of wall at least every two.

Wes is probably at the workshop already, waiting. He can scale the stone wall in half a minute. Thanks to his height, he can leap, catch the high spires with his treble hook, then brace against the wall to bounce to the top like a cat. I'd be jealous, but it's kind of entrancing to watch.

Not that I'd ever tell him. I'd never hear the end of it.

Entrancing, Tessa? It's just a wall. Nothing like this. And then he'd climb a tree or do a cartwheel off the workshop roof or walk on his hands.

And then I'd have to punch him, because that would be better than him seeing the blush creeping out from under my mask, because *yes*, all of that is equally entrancing.

I need to stop thinking about Wes. This sentry light needs to stop spinning. I need to make my rounds, or we'll lose days of healing. Some people don't have days. A few might not even have hours.

I have to get out of here first. If I'm caught with a pack full of Moonflower petals, King Harristan and his brother, Prince Corrick, will tie me down in the palace gardens and let the birds peck out my organs.

Suddenly, the light stops, way down near the corner where the wall dips into shadow because of a slope. It's where the amateurs always try to make their escape.

I'm not going to waste an opportunity. I tear out of my hiding

place like a rabbit scared from a glen, my own treble hook already swinging. I can't fling it all the way to the spires like Wes can, but I can reach the brackets that sit midway. The hook whistles up at the wall ahead of me, and I leap before it pulls taut. My boots scrape against the stone as I climb, slipping a little on the granite. I reach the bracket, the tiniest little ledge, but it's enough to brace against while I pull the treble hook free and swing for the top. It clangs onto the spires, and up I go.

The light begins to move.

I suck in a breath and urge my feet to push me faster, higher. The pack bounces against my ribs as my feet slip and shift against the wall. My hands are burning where the rope slides. The light sweeps close, and it's suddenly blinding.

Then I'm over the wall, half rappelling, half dropping to the forest ground like a sack of oats. I give the rope a jerk and the hook falls beside me, a little jingle in the gravel at the base of the wall. Dirt and debris cling to the homespun wool of my skirts, but I don't dare move to brush it away. I can almost taste my heartbeat as I hold my breath and wait for the sentries to ring the alarm.

But no. Brightness glides along the edge as the light continues on its path.

I swallow my heart and wind up my hook. A crescent moon hangs high in the sky, but the barest hint of purple gleams at the horizon, a reminder that I hesitated too long, and time grows short. I slip through the forest with practiced ease, my feet silent on the fallen pine needles. I usually smell fire from the wood stove by now, because Wes always beats me back. We have a system: he starts the kettle and grinds the petals so we can make the elixir, while I weigh and divide the powder into the appropriate dosage.

Then he bottles the liquid as it's ready, I wrap it into our packs, and together we make our rounds.

But today, there's no smell of wood smoke.

I get to the workshop, and there's no Weston.

I think of that light stopping on the wall. My heart is in my throat again.

Wes isn't stupid. He wouldn't try the corner. I didn't hear an alarm anyway.

But he's still not here, and I'm already late.

I light the fire and try not to worry. I can hear his voice telling me to keep calm. *Mind your mettle, Tessa.* They're the first words he said to me on the night he saved my life, and he's said them a dozen times since.

He's fine. He has to be fine. Sometimes we can't meet at all, and one of us waits at the workshop for fifteen minutes before running solo. Mistress Solomon occasionally keeps me late, brewing and measuring and weighing the herbal remedies that she promises her customers will work—but they rarely do. Sometimes Weston's master needs him at the forge early, because some spoiled sportsman needs a new sword or a horse has thrown a shoe. It's happened before.

But Wes was here earlier. And he's always back first.

The workshop is tiny and warms quickly from the fire. There's no electricity out here, so the workshop is dim, but I don't need much light for this. I busy my hands to keep from worry, grinding each petal into dust, careful to scrape every speck onto the tray of my scale. Even dry, they're fragrant. The elites pay dearly for every fraction of an ounce, then waste it by drinking the elixir three times a day, even those who show no signs of disease. *Preventive*

measures, the king calls it. Once a day is usually plenty, and I have my notes to prove it. Even Wes was distributing too much in the beginning, until I showed him that we could help far more people with less. My father would have called it a waste. A waste of good treatment when those who can't afford it are dying.

Then again, my father was executed for treason and black market dealings, so I don't call it anything at all. I just do what I can.

I glance out the window. The purple horizon has taken on the faintest hint of pink.

I glance at the door, as if that will make Wes appear.

It doesn't. The kettle whistles. I divide the water into tiny measured cups and add half an ounce of ground petals to each, along with two drops of roseseed oil for the cough, which I measure out almost as carefully as the Moonflower petals themselves. I try not to steal what I can come by honestly, but roseseed nearly costs me a week's wages, so I don't even let Wes measure it.

Once the petals and roseseed have dissolved, I weigh in a bit of turmeric, which can bring down a fever enough to let the medicine work better, but I have to add a sprig of mint and a pinch of sugar, too. Adults don't usually need much convincing to swallow the tincture, but we can't risk wasting it on children who might spit it out.

From the Royal Sector, horns blast and shouts cry out, and I jump so hard that I overturn a cup. They've caught someone.

Wes.

I should run and see. No, I should run and hide.

My muscles refuse to do either.

Mind your mettle, Tessa.

I need to move. I need to finish. When the Moonflower is

combined with the other ingredients, the elixir works better—but then they're only good for a few hours after brewing. I need to finish our rounds, even if I have to do it alone.

The horns continue to blow. Shouting echoes in the distance. They're going to wake half the sector. My breath has become a low keening from my throat. I imagine Prince Corrick being called down to deal with the traitor. The sentries aren't gentle. Weston's easy smile will be a grimace of pain. I'll hear his screams from here. They'll tear him apart with the tiniest knives imaginable. They'll stuff his mouth with burning coals. They'll feed him alive to the royal lions. They'll burn each limb, one by one, until he loses consciousness from the—

"Lord, Tessa, you hardly need me anymore."

I shriek and overturn another cup. There he is, in the doorway, his blue eyes bright behind the mask, his smile easy.

Weston sees the mess I've made and rolls his eyes. "Or maybe you do." He moves forward and sets the cup upright. "Did you already put the powder in that one?"

I don't know if I want to hug him or hit him. Maybe both. "You're late. I heard the horns. I thought—I thought they caught you."

"Not today." He pulls the sleeves of petals from his pack, then follows them with three apples, along with a twist of sugared dough that's still warm from an oven. "Here. The baker was out back scolding his daughter, so I swiped you some food."

He was late because he brought me *breakfast*. Not just any breakfast, either. Food from the Royal Sector will be the finest imaginable. The apples will be injected with honey, the twists of dough made with real butter and laced with cream and sugar.

My mouth opens. Closes. I frown and turn away. My throat is tight for an entirely new reason. "That's very kind of you, Weston."

"'That's very kind of you'?" he scoffs. "My, aren't we feeling proper this morning."

"I need to finish the elixirs."

"I'll finish. You eat."

"I'll eat in a minute." The horns continue on the other side of the wall, but now I can ignore them. Probably another black marketeer. We'll likely see his skin suspended beside the gates tomorrow, after the king and his brother are done with the body.

"Fine." Weston takes an apple, kicks back in the only chair, and props his booted feet up on the worktable. He wears a wide-brimmed black hat above the mask that stretches over his eyes, but he tips the hat back now that we're in the workshop. I only ever see him by firelight, so I can't tell exactly what color his hair is, but he usually needs a shave by now, and the faint beard growth always seems reddish brown when he sits near a candle, matching the dusting of freckles near the edge of his mask. The skin around his eyes is smudged with kohl or soot, making the blue brighter than any eyes I've ever seen. My own eyes are hazel green, my brown hair in a tight braid under my cap. Wes always says I look like a cat in my mask and my black jacket. Once, when I was feeling brave and cocky, I told him he should see me without the disguise so he knows what a proper young woman looks like, but his face went grave.

"Never," he said. "It's too dangerous. If we know what the other looks like, the information can be gained under torture. I won't do that to you." He paused. "And I sure don't want you to do it to me."

That was the first time I realized that Weston Lark probably

isn't his real name. He likely assumes Tessa Cade is fake, too, but it's not. When we met two years ago, my parents had just been killed in front of me, and I was too racked with grief to come up with another name.

"You're quiet," says Wes. He loudly crunches the apple, and I want to smack it out of his hand. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." I bottle the elixir I've already made—usually his job—and pour new cups of water to begin the process again.

Behind me, I hear him shift out of the chair and stand. He comes close enough for me to catch his scent, like the woods and the cinnamon from the bakery—but also something heavier underneath, something unmistakably Wes. "Tessa."

I jab an elbow into his midsection, and I have the satisfaction of hearing him grunt.

"What was that for?" he demands.

"You made me worry."

"But I brought you breakfast." His voice is rich and deep behind me.

I ignore him.

He leans in until his breath brushes against the sliver of skin between my hair and the high neck of my jacket. The other apple appears in front of me, wrapped up in his long fingers. "It's a really *good* breakfast," he taunts.

I take the apple. Sugar dusts the skin. It's warm to the touch, and I wonder if the honey inside is warm, too.

Despite myself, I take a bite. The honey is warm. "I hate you," I say with my mouth full.

"That'll probably work out for the best." He flicks my hat up a few inches and grins. "Now eat quick," he says. "We have rounds to make."

Chapter Two

Corrick

I've been listening to my brother's breathing for hours. There's a new sound each time he inhales, a faint stuttering in his lungs. In the Wilds, they call it the death rattle, because it means the end is near.

Here in his chambers, I'm unwilling to use the word *death* at all. I'm unwilling to even think it.

He doesn't have a fever. There's no cause to worry.

I can't even convince myself.

Sunlight blazes through the open window, and birds trill in the trees. Harristan shouldn't be sleeping this late, but I hate to wake him. To everyone outside the doors to his rooms, we've been deliberating over paperwork all morning. I've called for food twice, enough to feed a dozen people, but most of it sits untouched. Flies have begun gathering on the sliced fruit, and a bee drones over the pastries.

Harristan coughs faintly, and his breathing eases. Maybe

that's all it was, a tickle in his throat. A tightness in my own chest loosens, and I run a hand across the back of my neck, finding it damp.

A faint breeze nudges at my papers with enough insistence that I tuck most of them under the weight of the lamp before they can scatter across the desk. One of us has to work. I've been making notes along the margins of a funding request from one of the eastern cities, looking for omissions and inaccuracies in their statement demonstrating the need for a new bridge. I expected to get through only a few pages before Harristan would wake up, but now I've gone through the entire report and it must be nearly midday.

I tug my pocket watch free and glance at the glittering diamonds embedded in its face. It *is* midday. If he doesn't appear at the meeting of the sector consuls, there will be talk. I can only silence so much.

As if my thoughts wake him, my brother stirs, blinking in the sunlight. He frowns at me and sits up, shirtless, then runs a hand down his face. "It's late. Why didn't you wake me?"

I listen to his voice carefully, but there's no roughness to his tone, no sign of any difficulty breathing. Maybe I imagined it. "I was just about to." I move to the sideboard and lift the kettle. "The tea has gone cold." I pour a cup anyway and carry it to him, along with a thin corked tube of Moonflower elixir that's darker than usual. The palace apothecary doubled his dosage last week when the coughing started again, so maybe the medicine is beginning to work.

Harristan uncorks the tube, drinks it, and makes a face.

"There, there," I say without a lick of sympathy.

He grins. That's something he only does when we're alone. Neither of us smiles outside these rooms very often. "What have you been doing all morning?"

"I went through the request from Artis. I've drafted a refusal for you to sign."

His expression turns serious. "A refusal?"

"They're asking for twice what a new bridge would cost. They hid it well, but someone got greedy."

"You hardly need me anymore."

The words are said lightly, but they hit me like an arrow. Kandala needs its king. I need my brother.

I lock away my worries and fold my arms. "You need to dress—and shave. I'll call for Geoffrey. I've said we were too busy for you to bother earlier. Quint has requested an audience with you twice, but he will need to wait until after the evening meal, unless—"

"Cory." His voice is soft, and I go still. He only ever calls me Cory when we're alone, one of the few reminders of childhood we have left. A nickname from when I was small and eager and trailing after him everywhere he went. A name that was once spoken in gentle fondness by our mother or encouraging praise by our father, back when we believed our family was beloved by all. Back before anyone knew about the fever, or the Moonflower, or the way our country would change in ways no one expected.

Back when everyone expected Harristan to have decades before he'd take the throne, that he'd rule with firm kindness and thoughtful care for his people, just as our parents did.

But four years ago, they were assassinated right in front of us. Shot through the throat in the throne room. The arrows pinned them upright, their heads hanging cockeyed, their eyes wide and

glassy as they choked on their own blood. The image still haunts my dreams sometimes.

Harristan was nineteen. I was fifteen. He took an arrow in the shoulder when he dove to cover me.

It should have been the other way around.

I stare back into his blue eyes and look for any sign of sickness. There is none. "What?"

"The medicine is working again." His voice is quiet. "You don't need to play nursemaid."

My smile feels a little wicked. "Cruel Cory playing nursemaid? Never."

He rolls his eyes. "No one calls you Cruel Cory."

"Not to my face." No, to my face, I'm Your Highness, or Prince Corrick, or sometimes, when they're being especially formal, the King's Justice.

Behind my back, I'm called worse. Much worse. So is Harristan.

We don't mind. Our parents were loved—and they were loving in return. It led to betrayal and death.

Fear works better.

I move to the closet and pull out a laced shirt to toss at my brother. "You don't want a nursemaid? Then stop lazing around. There's a country to run."



The midday meal is already arranged on the sideboard when we enter. Roasted pheasant drips with honey and berries, nestled among a dense bed of greens and root vegetables. A few feathers have been artfully placed along the gilded edge of each platter, held

in place by a glistening drop of crystalized honey. Though the stewards stand in silence along the wall, waiting to serve, the eight other Royal Consuls are engaged in lively conversation by the window. I'm the ninth, but I have no interest in lively conversation.

There used to be ten, but Consul Barnard led the plot to have my parents killed. He would have killed us, too. After Harristan saved my life, I saw Barnard coming after him with a dagger.

My brother was on top of me, his breath panicked and full of pain in my ear. I pulled that arrow out of Harristan's shoulder and stabbed it right into Barnard's neck.

I blink the memory away. The consuls fall silent when we enter the room, each offering a short bow to my brother before moving to their chairs, though no one will sit until Harristan does, and no one will eat until we both have taken a bite.

The table is shaped like a rectangle at one end, narrowing to a point at the other, like the head of an arrow. Harristan eases into his chair at the head of the table, and I ease into mine, directly to his right. The eight consuls ease into theirs, leaving one seat empty. It's the one directly beside me, where Consul Barnard used to sit. The Trader's Landing sector has no new consul, and Harristan is in no rush to appoint one. In whispers, the people often call it Traitor's Landing, after what Barnard did, but no one says it in front of us. No one wants to remind the king or his brother of what happened.

They respect my brother—as they should.

They fear me.

I don't mind. It spares me some tedious conversations.

We've known everyone in this room for our entire lives, but we've long since doused any comfort borne of familiarity. We saw what

complacence and trust did to our parents, and we know what it could do to us. When Harristan was nineteen, blood still seeping through a bandage on his shoulder, he ran his first meeting in this room. We were both numb with grief and shock, but I followed him to take a place standing by his shoulder. I remember thinking the consuls would be sympathetic and compassionate following the deaths of our parents. I remember thinking we would all grieve together.

But we were barely in the room for a full minute before Consul Theadosia snidely commented that a child had no place attending a meeting of the King's Council. She was talking about me—but her tone implied she was talking about Harristan, too.

"This child," said Harristan, "is my brother, your prince." His voice was like thunder. I'd never heard my brother's voice like that. It gave me the strength to stand when I so badly wanted to hide under my bed and pretend my world hadn't been turned upside down.

"Corrick saved my life," said Harristan. "The life of your new king. He risked himself when none of you were willing to do the same, including you, Theadosia. I have named him King's Justice, and he will attend any meeting he so pleases."

I went very still at those words. The King's Justice was the highest-ranking adviser to the king. The highest position beside Harristan himself. Our father once said that he was allowed to stay in the people's good graces because the King's Justice handled anything . . . unsavory.

Another consul at the time, a man named Talec, coughed to cover a laugh and said, "Corrick will be the King's Justice? At fifteen?"

"Was I unclear?" said Harristan.

"Exactly what justice will he mete out? No dinner? No playtime for Kandala's criminals?"

"We must be strong," said Theadosia, her voice full of scorn. "You dishonor your parents. This is no time for Kandala's rulers to be a source of mockery."

You dishonor your parents. The words turned my insides to ice. Our parents were killed because the council failed to uncover a traitor.

"He looks like he's ready to *cry*," said Talec, "and you expect to hold your throne with him at your side?"

I *was* ready to cry. But after their statements, I was terrified to show one single flicker of weakness. My parents were killed by someone they trusted, and we couldn't allow the same to happen to us.

"No dinner and no playtime," I said, and because Harristan sounded so unyielding, I forced my voice to be the same. I felt like I was playing a role for which I'd had no time to rehearse. "You will spend thirty days in the harvest fields. You are to fast from midday until the next morning."

There was absolute silence for a moment, and then Theadosia and Talec exploded out of their seats. "This is preposterous!" they cried. "You can't assign us to work in the fields with the laborers."

"You asked for a demonstration of my justice," I said. "Be sure to work quickly. I have heard the foremen carry whips."

Talec's eyes were like fire. "You're both children. You'll never hold this throne."

"Guards," I said flatly.

I remember worrying that the guards would not obey, that the

council would overthrow us both. That we *would* dishonor our parents. After what Barnard had done, every face seemed to hide a secret motive that would lead to our deaths.

But then the guards stepped forward and took hold of Talec and Theadosia. The doors swung closed behind them, leaving the room in absolute silence. Every pair of eyes around the table sat wide and staring at my brother.

Harristan gestured at the seat to his right—the seat just vacated by Talec. "Prince Corrick. Take a seat."

I did. No one else dared to say a word.

Harristan has held onto his throne for four years.

We're later than usual today, and the food is likely going cool, but he's in no rush to eat. When my father ran meetings, there was a sense of jovial ease around this table, but that's always been lacking during Harristan's reign.

He glances at me. "You have the response for Artis?"

I place a leather folio on the table before him, along with a fountain pen. He makes a show of reviewing the document, though he'd probably sign a letter authorizing his own execution if I placed it in front of him. Harristan has little patience for lengthy legal documents. He's all about grand plans and the broad view. I'm the one who dwells in details.

He signs with a little flourish, lays the pen to the side, and shoves the folio down the table to Jonas Beeching, an older man with a girth as round as he is tall. I guarantee he's dying to eat, but he eagerly flips open the cover. He's expecting a positive response, I can tell. He's practically salivating at the idea of bringing chests full of gold back to Artis this afternoon.

His face falls when he reads the refusal I drafted. "Your

Majesty," he says carefully to Harristan. "This bridge would reduce the travel time from Artis to the Royal Sector by three days."

"It should also cost half as much," I say.

"But—but my engineers have spent months on this proposal." He glances around the table, then back at us. "Surely you could not make a determination in less than a day—"

"Your engineers are wrong," I say.

"Perhaps we can come to some sort of compromise. There—there must be an error in calculation—"

"Do you seek a compromise, or do you suspect an error?" says Harristan.

"I—" Jonas's mouth hangs open. He hesitates, and his voice turns rough. "Both, Your Majesty." He pauses. "Artis has lost many lives to the fever."

At the mention of the fever, I want to look at Harristan. I want to reassure myself that he's fine. That the rattle in his breathing this morning was all in my imagination.

I steel my will and keep my eyes on Jonas. "Artis receives a ration of Moonflower petals, just like the other sectors. If your people need more, they will need to buy it just like anyone else."

"I know. I know." Jonas clears his throat. "It seems the warm weather is causing the fever to spread more quickly among the dockworkers. We are having difficulty keeping ships loaded and staffed. This bridge would reduce our reliance on the waterways and allow us to rebuild some of the trade that has been lost."

"Then you should have asked for an appropriate amount of gold," I say.

"Artis can't build a bridge without healthy workers," says Arella Cherry, who sits at the opposite end of the table. She took over for

her father when he retired last year. She's from Sunkeep, a sector far in the south that's bordered by the Flaming River on the west and the ocean to the south and east. Her people fare the best from the fevers, and it's thought that Sunkeep's high heat and humidity make them less susceptible—but the heat is so oppressive that their population is by far the smallest of any of Kandala's sectors. She's soft-spoken, with rich russet-brown skin and waist-length black hair that she keeps twisted into a looping knot at the back of her head. "Medicine should factor into their proposal."

"Every city needs healthy workers for all projects," says Harristan. "Which is why each city receives a ration of medicine for their people. Including yours, Arella."

"Yes, Your Majesty," she says. "And my people fare well because of it." She pauses. "But my people are not attempting to construct a bridge across the Queen's River in the dead heat of summer."

Her voice is quiet and deferential, but there's a core of steel beneath her gentle voice and soft hands. If she had her way, Harristan would seize Allisander's lands along with everyone else's, and he'd distribute Moonflower petals with abandon. We'd also be thrust into a full-on civil war when the other consuls refused to yield their territories, but she's never keen to acknowledge that side of things. That said, she's one of the few people at this table I enjoy a bit of conversation with.

Unfortunately, the last woman who weaseled her way into my thoughts also tried to poison me and Harristan at dinner. It wasn't the *first* assassination attempt, but it was definitely the closest anyone has gotten since our parents were killed.

So romance is off the table for me.

Allisander Sallister clears his throat. He sits almost directly

opposite me, and his face is pale, with pink spots over his cheeks that look painted on. His hair and brows are both thick and brown, and he wears a goatee that he's clearly enamored of, but I think looks ridiculous. He's only a year younger than Harristan, and they were friends when they were boys. My brother had few companions when we were children, but Allisander was one of the few who had the patience to sit in the library and move chess pieces around a board or listen to tutors read from books of poetry.

But then, when they were teens, Allisander's father, Nathaniel Sallister, requested additional lands from a neighboring sector, claiming his farmlands yielded better crops—and would therefore yield better profits, and greater taxes for the Crown. Our father, the king, refused. Allisander then made a plea to Harristan, leaning on their friendship, asking him to intercede on the Sallisters' behalf—and still, our father, a fair and just man, refused.

"We cannot force one sector to yield lands to another," he said to us over dinner. "Our lands were divided by law, and we will not unjustly take from one to give to another."

He made Harristan reject Allisander's request personally. Publicly. At a dinner with all the consuls present.

In retrospect, I think Father meant to send a message, that it was unfair to seek favoritism through his children, and he wouldn't play those kinds of games.

But Allisander took it personally. We didn't see him in the palace much after that.

Not until last year, when his silver-hoarding father stepped down. Harristan had hoped Allisander would be a new voice for his sector, the key to distributing more of the Moonflower petals among the population.

Instead, he's worse than his father was. Under Nathaniel Sallister, Moonflower prices were expensive, but stable. Allisander never misses a chance to negotiate for more. Harristan doesn't like to think that their controversy as teenagers would have anything to do with the way Allisander barters now, but I have no doubt.

I spend a lot of time at these meetings imagining ways to irritate him.

"A new bridge along with extra medicinal rations would give Artis an unfair advantage at trade," Allisander says.

"An unfair advantage!" Jonas sputters. "You and Lissa control the Moonflower, and you want to accuse me of seeking an unfair advantage?"

Allisander steeples his fingers and says nothing.

Jonas isn't wrong. Allisander Sallister represents the Moonlight Plains, and Lissa Marpetta represents Emberridge—the two sectors where the Moonflower, the only known treatment for the fevers that plague Kandala, grows.

Therefore the richest sectors. The most powerful.

Also, the reason all my imagined irritants for Allisander stay in my head. I can hate him and need him as an ally at the same time. "Regardless of advantage," I say, "your motives in your proposal were deceitful, Jonas."

Allisander glances across the table at me and gives a small nod of appreciation.

I nod in return. I want to throw the fountain pen at him.

Roydan Pelham clears his throat from the other end of the table. He's pushing eighty, with weathered skin that can't seem to decide if it's more beige or more sallow. He's served on this council since my grandfather was king. Most of the others seem to

grudgingly tolerate him, but I rather like the old man. He's set in his ways, but he's also the only consul who seemed genuinely concerned for us after our parents were killed. No one dotes on Harristan—or me, for that matter—but if anyone could be considered doting, it would be Roydan.

"My people suffer as greatly as Artis's," he says quietly. "If you grant this petition, I will seek the same."

"You have no river to cross!" says Jonas.

"Indeed," says Roydan. "But my people are just as sick."

My brain wants to drift. This is a common argument. If the proposal from Artis hadn't started it, something else would have. The fever has no cure. Our people are suffering. Allisander and Lissa won't yield the power and control granted to them by their lands and holdings—and as much as Harristan would love to be able to seize their properties, the other consuls would never stand for it.

Harristan lets them argue for a few minutes. He's more patient than I am. Or maybe he's just better rested. I did let him sleep till noon, when I've been up longer than the sun.

Eventually, my brother shifts his weight and inhales, and that's all it takes for them to shut up.

"Your petition was rejected," Harristan says to Jonas. "You are free to file another before we convene next month."

The man sucks in a breath like he wants to argue, but his eyes flick to me, and his mouth claps shut. My brother's temper has a limit, and no one here wants to find it.

"When your people are suffering," Arella says fearlessly, "it would not be inappropriate for the Crown to help make them well."

Harristan looks down the table at her. "At what cost? All of

Kandala is suffering. The supply of Moonflower petals is not endless. How would you choose, Arella? Would you sacrifice your doses? Your family's?"

She swallows. She wouldn't. None of them would.

I think of Harristan's cough this morning, of his fever last month, and I can't even blame them.

I wouldn't either.

"We will dine now," says Harristan, and the silent attendants shift away from the wall to begin serving the food. For a short while, the only sound in the room is the clatter of silver against china. But under it all, I catch the low hiss off Jonas's voice, spoken under his breath to Jasper Gold, the consul from Mosswell.

"They're heartless," he says.

I freeze. From the corner of my eye, I see Harristan's fork go still as well. It might be a coincidence. I wait to see if he'll acknowledge the words.

He doesn't.

And because I'm *not* heartless, I don't either.