

JILLIAN KUHLMANN

The Two Sisters



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The sun's glare transformed the horizon to a featureless, white hot blur. Still Morainn gazed covetously out, stalking away from the large curtained opening that served as a window in her chamber on the barge and back again. She reminded me of a caged animal, a lean, intelligent predator.

"I thought I was the prisoner," I observed, causing Morainn to cease her pacing, brows arched in an appraising look in my direction.

"We all are," she replied curtly, but her eyes were soft with thought. "I can't go out. I burn too easily, and I haven't Gannet's... skill... for preventing it."

She didn't elaborate, and I didn't ask. Whatever Morainn's secrets, her brother had more.

But I was as eager to stretch my legs as she was, even if it meant providing my captors with some comfort. I stalled, catching my lip between my teeth as I weighed the benefits of cooperation against my quiet reticence of the past few days. It didn't help that already Morainn didn't feel like my enemy, for all my heart fought that she should be. I might have agreed to go with her in exchange for my family's safety, but it hadn't felt like much of a choice.

"Do you have any nut oils? And your medicinal salves, may I see them?" I asked after a moment. Morainn stared at me uncertainly before crossing to the ornamental chest where she was dragged each morning to be fussed over, producing several small vials and three squat stone jars with tight fitting lids.

"I'll need one of the brushes, too," I continued, moving to hover at her elbow until her fingers alighted upon a cosmetic brush with a sturdy bone handle. I nodded, accepting everything and laying it out on one of the low tables where Morainn took her meals.

It was lucky we'd had to do more for ourselves in exile than we would have done otherwise, or I wouldn't have known the recipe. I portioned out a palm-sized amount of salve from a jar with a caricature of an eye painted on it, using the brush to carefully blend a few drops from one of the vials until the two had combined to form a thin paste. I tested it against the heel of my hand, adding drops of oil until the consistency felt right.

Morainn watched with interest. When I offered the salve, still sticky on my fingers, she scraped her own across mine before applying the paste liberally over her nose, cheeks, and bare shoulders.

"Now perhaps they'll think you share Gannet's talents."

Despite feeling this small kindness was somehow a betrayal, I smiled. Morainn's features darkened momentarily.

"No, no they won't," she insisted, turning her back on me as she strode toward the exit. She cast a look over her shoulder, dark thoughts chased away by the promise of going out. "Are you coming?"

Her offer surprised me, but no more than mine had done to her. I slapped a modest amount of the balm on my skin, as well, before wordlessly following. The barge slowed, almost in anticipation of our exit.

"Perfect," Morainn chirped, her sandaled feet alighting on the sand. She waved in the direction of soldiers lowering their burdens in the late afternoon heat, the animals panting for want of water. "Let them rest. I've had my fill of resting."

She ventured out ahead of the barge and the caravan of armed men, women, and beasts that accompanied it. We wouldn't be allowed to go completely alone, of course, but the two soldiers who gave up their brief respite to follow us did so at a distance. Morainn's immediate company had its benefits. If not privacy, at least the illusion of it.

We walked side by side, but our tracks crossed now and again, our course lazy and wandering. The barge would catch up to us and when it did we would board again, prisoner and princess, but until then...

"Would you tell me a story, Eiren?"

I knew what she wanted before she did, felt it in the questing tangent of her heart, her imagination stirred to fill an empty landscape. I readied myself with a breath, having already decided in the instant before she asked what story I would tell.

"Two daughters were born on the same day to a prosperous tradeswoman, one as the sun melted golden on the horizon, the second once it had dipped and left the world in purpled darkness. The first daughter was called Meira, and the second, Leila.

The tradeswoman made her living prowling the sands from village to village, plying goods and secrets. She could not give up her work even with two girls to raise, so until they could walk beside her she carried them: Leila against her strong back, Meira pressed to her beating heart.

Leila grew sturdy; whip-thin, weathered, and brown like a tree that holds fast to an unforgiving cliff side. Meira, sheltered from the sun and wind by her mother's body, was a fair, fragile creature, intuitive as the underground stream that skirts the hardest stone. They were each a joy to their mother and a friend to the other, though they rarely agreed. It was one such disagreement that parted them forever.

In their fourteenth year, their mother grew dangerously ill on the road. As she had done when they were babes they bore her between them to the wise woman of the nearest village, ready to give everything they had in trade for her good health. But the wise woman could not help them.

'What she needs I do not have. Only the pit of the star olive, swallowed whole, can save her.'

'Where can we find it?' Asked Meira.

'There is only one place that it grows, in the grove of a selfish lord who will never share it nor sell it to you.'

'Then we'll take it,' said Leila, and though the wise woman tried to dissuade her, she would not be moved."

Morainn's grumble of discontent interrupted me before her words.

"Don't you feel that the people in stories are often set up for failure?" A spray of sand lashed out behind her as a strong gust of wind threatened us both. "Why didn't the wise woman just say that there was nothing she could do?"

I smiled, my expression no doubt that of the insufferable storyteller who has all of the pieces in their mind already and doesn't have to wait to hear the tale's end.

"I wouldn't have much of a story to tell you, if she had," I cautioned. "And besides, why should people behave any more reasonably in stories than they do in real life?"

Morainn shrugged, but she didn't say anything more. It didn't matter to me if her silence was the product of agreement or reticence. I continued.

"Meira was no happier with Leila's plan than the wise woman had been and told her so, but Leila couldn't watch their mother suffer and fade when there was something she could do to help. The tradeswoman was past the point of being able to offer her opinion on her daughter's course of action, and that was reason enough to act.

The following night when the hour was darkest and deepest, Leila stole over the high wall of the lord's estate and into his treasured grove. The trees there were heavy with fruits enough to fill a hundred bellies. Vines sagged under the weight of many seasons worth of wine grapes.

And yet Leila knew that the lord lived alone, without a wife or children, and would not spare even a withered apricot rotting in the soil to a hungry stranger.

The star olives he treasured most. They grew in a diamond shaped hollow near a pleasure patio where the lord took his meals, evidenced by the plates and trays only picked over, crawling now with flies and fat beetles. Leila shook her head at such waste before plucking a single ripe olive from the branch and stealing back over the wall.

When Leila returned to her mother and sister, she gently pried open the lips of the former and, tearing the flesh from the olive with her own teeth, dropped the pit inside her mother's mouth. Meira was quick to wash the pit down with a dribble of water for all she didn't approve of Leila's methods for acquiring it.

The pair fell asleep sometime in the night while tending over their mother. It was she who woke them shortly after sunrise, her voice full-bodied as she complained of hunger. She was cured."

The terrain began to change as we dipped down into a hollow the barge would surely struggle to navigate. But Morainn was leading the way, and didn't stop. I considered that if we should grow lost in the desert or parted from the barge, I would outlive them all, even the battle-hardened soldiers that stalked behind us. They were accustomed to their provisions, their company, moving with a purpose. My years in the desert, the sand that littered my blood and built up my bones, had fortified my mind, instead. I might have been small, but I knew what was needed most to survive: sacrifice.

"With her mother's good health returned, Meira's conscience grew in strength, too. She couldn't let Leila's misdeed go without report, and so she begged an audience with the lord and explained how her sister had stolen the olive. Though she told the lord that it had delivered their mother from death's door, he was unmoved. He forced Meira to follow him into the grove, her story proven by the wound on the tree where the olive had been plucked. Then and there he dropped to his knees and begged Adah, the deliverer of justice, to visit a fair punishment upon the offending sister.

The god was with them in an instant, spiriting Leila and their mother, too, to the grove. Because Adah considered himself just, he offered Leila the opportunity to defend herself against Meira's accusation.

But she would not. A single olive from such bounty seemed to Leila insignificant when compared with a woman's life. Adah's justice, however, was the sort that rewarded faithful servants like the selfish lord, whose cold sense of order eclipsed compassion. Adah punished Leila for her theft and for her refusal to speak in her own defense by rendering her incapable of speech. Every time the girl opened her mouth, a belch of sand and fierce wind escaped her lips. As for Meira, Adah admired her lawfulness, and made it so that her mouth bubbled forth each time she opened it the greatest treasure in the desert: clean, cool water. Praising Adah, the lord took Meira for his bride that very night. They would never thirst, nor their children, either."

I paused, a note of finality in my tone for all I was waiting for Morainn to ask me for more. There were two endings to this tale, and when she opened her mouth to speak, I knew she preferred the one that I did, too.

"What about Leila?"

I tucked a smile into my shoulder, looking away from Morainn.

"Leila's curse proved to be quite the opposite. She joined her mother in trade, carving new routes and blocking old ones with the sandstorm her voice had become. Neither she nor their mother saw Meira again, for she was not permitted by the lord to wander far from the grove her gift sustained."

“And Adah just let Leila live like that, profiting from his punishment?”

“Adah forgot her the moment he judged her. His justice is the kind that has no memory.”

Morainn looked away. I knew that she thought I was alluding to her, to her people, for their sentencing of mine. I was surprised that I hadn't been.

We crested a small hill, laboring over the slope until Morainn and I stood in silhouette with the sun behind our backs, gazing out and down. But this path was an impassable one for the barge. Not because of stones or uncertain terrain, but because of the unnatural pit that yawned before us. Here bodies were piled one on top of the other, armored limbs tangled, faces drawn and starved, bones bleaching in the sun where the flesh had been eaten away. The sand should have claimed them, and I wondered with the tale still on my tongue if divine means hadn't laid them out this way.

Morainn surprised me by descending, the set of her shoulders imperious, as though she approached some living assembly. My steps faltered as I followed. It wasn't that I feared the dead, only that I could see in her the weight of responsibility for these lives lost, and it surprised me. More than any gesture of kindness or display of intelligence, her sympathy stumbled me most.

There was no odor, for these corpses had been here for months. The wind and sand had robbed them of their features, but they were distinguished still by the clothing that they wore. Only when we drew near did I notice that these were Ambarian and Aleynian soldiers both, Morainn's people and mine. Skeletal hands were draped over each other in a grim picture of friendship, jaws dropped open in wordless cries of rage, howls for mercy, as though they could swallow the sun that baked them.

“Peace in death,” muttered Morainn, pacing the edge of mass grave. The soldiers descended behind us and with them a wind, stirring what hair remained on the wizened skulls of the dead in an eerie, animated dance. When the soldiers flanked us, one beside Morainn and the other with a hand resting lightly on her weapon to my left, our shadows shook and lengthened. Or so it seemed to me at first, but something moved that wasn't we four.

“I don't think they are at peace,” I said quietly, a hard note of warning in my tone despite the softness of my voice. I trained my eyes on the nearest corpses now, hairs pricking up on my arms, neck, and scalp. We had occupied many tombs on our escape into exile, so many years ago, and in those places I'd learned to read the signs of the restless dead. I'd never seen the shambling ones, the life-bleeding ones, but as with most things, I had many stories to occupy my imagination.

Morainn shot a look at me, but I didn't meet her eyes. Mine were fixed on the bodies that seemed now to curl around each other as though in a ruse, their dried knuckles cracking not from the heat but with the subtle shift of a body preparing to rise. Voices spun with a hoarse sweetness on the air, whistling in my ears like the senseless hum of insects.

I was imagining it. I had to be.

“We should go.”

The guard at my left drew her short sword as she spoke, wrist loose as she tested the weight of the blade in her hand. She looked out over the grave, as well, but if she saw what I saw or heard what I heard, she gave no sign.

“The barge cannot come this way. We'll have to climb the rise and meet them on level ground,” said the other, weapon still sheathed. I didn't want to turn my back on the grave and whatever haunts occupied it, but already Morainn and the soldiers were moving, pausing only when I didn't follow immediately. They were afraid that I planned to bolt, to use the unsteady footing of the piled dead to my advantage. I could see already one of the soldiers scheming how

he might pin me with one of the small knives hidden on the inside of the leather cuirass he wore. And I did intend to run, but it wasn't in that direction.

A withered eye twitched in a skull at my feet, rolling to fix me under its curdled, filmy gaze. That I hadn't imagined, nor the ghostly mate that popped into existence in the socket a vulture or vole had emptied, long ago.

"Go!" I shrieked, lucky not to have lost my arms as I hooked them around the trio, pulling and pushing up the way that we had come. I didn't know what manner of dead these were, the kind that shunned the light or those that scoffed at it, but there would be too many for even a hundred knives to pin or swords to slash. Neither the guards nor Morainn resisted me, but it was the wind that caught my hair when at least we reached the top of the hill and not the papery fingers of the skeletal dead. I looked back, panting with terror, and saw only dim, crumpled bodies, mundane as tumbled stones.

"Eiren." Morainn's tone was cautious, her eyes questing across my face and following my gaze down. In her mind I saw only wary curiosity, but in the guards something else: the desire to lead me back to the barge in restraints. I walled myself against them and against the mounting horrors in my own mind: that I was going mad, or that the madness below would only sleep, for a time, before claiming a less knowledgeable traveler.

I wouldn't wish such a fate on anyone, not even an Ambarian.

"What is it, Eiren? What did you see?" Morainn pressed me, hers the concern of a friend, not the command of a conqueror. I realized in that moment, watching the horizon shimmer with the humbled crawl of the barge as it approached, that I wasn't the survivor I believed myself to be. Even if I escaped, the Ambarians would only come for me again. My future was with them, however uncertain, and if I hoped to survive I would need to make the greatest sacrifice: trust.

"I thought they were the *stre'gei*, the dead ones that return to feast on the living," I admitted, honesty heavier than the weight of fear I'd carried up from the grave. I wasn't sure now what I had seen or sensed, but Morainn's face was open, absent of the judgment I would have expected even from my own sisters.

"I don't think they would return," Morainn reasoned, brow heavy with more than the slim circlet she wore. "Rare is the soldier who doesn't long for the end of the war, even if she finds it in death."

The barge rumbled an agreement like thunder. I saw the dark whip of a cloak that was Gannet, waiting for us at the barge's entrance. I fell into step beside Morainn once more, our sandled prints paired as we walked away from that dark place. She hadn't told me she didn't believe me and I would've known her suspicions, but I couldn't put the creaking putrid vision out of my head. Now it was my turn to press her.

"Even if you died in violence, if you died before you'd really had a chance to live?"

Morainn's features were obscured by the sun's glare, but I didn't need to see her face to know her heart.

"A longer life only leads to more mistakes. And there are far less desirable ways to die."

Her words ran me through like a spear, cleaving into my blood the knowledge that Morainn wanted no more to do with war than I did. She had been born to play a part, same as I had.

But while hers was drawing to a close, mine was just beginning.

Please enjoy the first two chapters of THE HIDDEN ICON, where Eiren and Morainn's world got its start.

The Hidden Icon

By Jillian Kuhlmann

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CHAPTER ONE

When I was nervous, I cycled through the seven histories of Shran in my head. And when I was very, very nervous, they tripped their way off of my tongue like tumbled stones, growing brighter with every telling.

My favorite is the story of Shran's youngest son, Salarahan, who was interred alive without his heart. The organ was held instead for many blood-won years by brother after brother as a powerful totem. Salarahan rose from his living grave after his brothers had slain each other and all but destroyed their father's kingdom, reclaiming his heart and the hearts of his people.

As Salarahan did, I preferred the keeping of stories and animals and children reared not to fight but to tend to children and animals and stories after them. It was in my blood, his gentleness, though my brother and sisters were more like bulls than the tiny, cautious bird I was named after, Eiren. It fled my mother's lips no sooner than she'd kissed my birth-slicked head, her last daughter, and the last in a long diluted line beginning with that gentle prince.

But even as I opened my mouth to begin his story, a look from my mother silenced me, her dark eyes full of meaning. They were outside the bolted door listening, our captors. And they were no more worthy of a tale from me than they were the kingdom they had snatched from us.

It was not the work of war time to prefer words to action, but I was no warrior for all we'd been at war most of my life. My father liked to say that the conflict began when my finger nails needed their first clippings, and after fifteen bloody years, I had bitten mine to the quick as we waited to surrender, prisoners in the palace that had once been our home. Ours was a story I didn't want to tell, but even as I sweated and shook with worry over our fate, already the details of the narrative collected in my mind. I looked at my mother, her heart breaking over and over again on her face and bleeding deep in the lines newly etched there, at my father and brother, my sisters, and knew they were no more ready to hear it than I was to tell it. But some stories are like hearts falling heavily into love: they cannot be stopped once they have been started.

Bolted or not, I felt sure the reliquary door would buckle in the oppressive humidity of sorrow. We were all hot and nervous and trying to hide it, my mother and father from each other, my brother from my sisters, my sisters from each other. Nobody bothered trying to hide anything from me. I stirred a thick layer of sand with my bare feet, evidence of the years of neglect since we had been forced to abandon our capitol for the deep deserts.

"It hardly feels like home."

My middle sister's voice was as plain as her face. Her paints and perfumed oils were with everything else we had been forced to abandon when we were captured, her gilded bracelets exchanged for bangles of red flesh, rubbed and raw. It had been a long ride.

"That's because we kept our beasts out of doors, where they belonged."

My brother, Jurnus, glowered at the closed door. He wrinkled his nose as though he could smell the men, the livestock stink that clung to their skin and too-thick beards, some of them with hands furry as mitts on the spears they bore. My brother's swords had been taken, too, for all the steel had never tasted blood, cast into the sand like discarded toys. A drift had kicked up and over them within minutes, burying them along with his hopes of someday wielding them. Lashed already to horses, our skin crisping after so many months in hiding underground, his had not been the only dreams to die.

No one answered Jurnus' insult. My father's gaze was inscrutable, but it was my mother's attention I sought again, following her sable eyes as they swept over her children and into the corners of the empty reliquary. Where green and yellow glass had hung in the stone worked windows there was nothing now but the relentless indifference of the sun that passed over and

over, day after day, thoughtless, as one would look upon a room too often frequented. We had taken this place for granted. There were shadows in the room the light could not touch, and in them I saw the ghosts of the treasures we had once kept here, treasured memories of my girlhood. What I remembered about being a child in the palace was a latticework of shadow and light, my bare feet padding from study desk to prayer bench, practice room to bed and over again. It had been a pleasant life, for a little while.

But my mother's expression haunted me more than my memories. I studied the vault of bones beneath her skin, like mine the color of the honeyed beer she and my father enjoyed, the taste of which had always paled considerably when compared to the thrill of pilfering some from their reserve. Like my face, too, hers bore the ugly stain of resignation. Our captors might not have had the power to change our eyes and lips, but they had all the rest and gave us both the expressions of helplessness that we wore.

"Do you remember the story of the world's edge?"

My mother's voice broke my gloomy reverie. I looked at her, into eyes pitted with weariness. Hardship made many women lean and ugly but my mother had been made more beautiful, thin with struggle but shining with a will to best it.

"I remember that sacrificial maidens were thrown into its boiling abyss," I answered roughly, which wasn't, I knew, the answer she was looking for. This was the oldest of games that I had played with my mother, trading bits of story back and forth between us. She'd told me many times how she had whispered stories to me when I had been in her womb, how I had beat back my answers against her belly and breast. This game had always cheered me, but not now. I didn't want to be drawn out of my sadness. What was the point?

She wasn't giving up.

"But if they had opened their arms and eyes they would not have sunk, but flown to another world." My mother held my gaze, and I couldn't have looked away even if I'd wanted to. She often knew just the right story to tell, but I wasn't willing to listen.

"You want me to open my arms to them?" I bristled, waving at the door. "They're more likely to cut them off than return the gesture."

"We can't know what they intend to do now," she insisted. If my mother had addressed any of my other siblings I might've believed her. But me?

"I can."

If the reliquary was full to bursting with our regret, a greater force of bald aggression waited just outside. It was as tangible to me as the sand in my teeth, the press of stone against my skin where my skirts had torn.

"Eiren," my father began, a cautionary note in his voice, but Jurnus raised his own in my defense.

"This isn't the time for stories. It isn't over yet; there must still be some who are loyal to us in the city, or -"

"There's no one left I'll allow to give their lives for us."

There was nothing gentle in my father's voice now. We had lost countless thousands in the years we had been at war, the bravest among them at our last stand in the desert. My eyes slid from my father's face to the stains on his pale tunic: soil, sweat, the rust-dark smudges of blood. The contingent of the guard who had been with us in exile had served him the whole of his life. I did not need to look at his face again to know that it was as hard for him to have lost these friends as it was the entirety of our kingdom. My temper cooled, but my dark thoughts could not be curbed. Were we waiting here to die, or worse?

My mother bowed her head in prayer. There were no benches here, no idols, but hers was a faith that did not demand such things. My sisters joined her, whispering, clutching at tangles in their hair. I made no utterances myself, listening only to my mother's fevered words when her low voice joined theirs. The meaning was unimportant to me. I was interested most in their steadiness, the current that ran beneath my mother's tongue as she spoke, the moisture pearly on her lips. Sweat and spittle were her offerings, her devotion a shore against which I could anchor myself. It had always been this way, but how much longer would we be allowed to worship as we wished, to grieve together? I thought of the dogs Jurnus had kept when we were children, how he had to foster the pups apart once they'd weaned from the bitch, how the sire had wandered once he'd bred. We would not remain a pack. It didn't matter what father said. If we were together, we were a heart around which the blood of our people would pool and flow.

And the monsters beyond the reliquary door knew it as well as I did.

As if on cue, the bolts creaked, the door tugged open by several of the soldiers who had waited without. My feet whipped under my skirt, shoulders shrinking. I was slight enough as it was and didn't need to try to hide, but when my father turned and stood I found myself peering around his legs like a child.

A lone guard strode into the reliquary, planting his feet in the mosaic mouth of a serpent that coiled in once-glittering blue; I noted his height, his heavy dress, the beard he no doubt cursed in the arid heat. His gloved hand clutched a spear, and there would be a whole host of others at his back if our postures proved anything more than defensive.

"Which one of you is Eiren?"

If I'd held a spear I would've snapped the shaft in surprise. My mother rose, too, blocking me completely from the guard's view. I could see him still between them, a sliver of nose, mouth, and armored muscle.

"Why do you want my daughter?"

The indomitable will conveyed in my father's stance was echoed in her tone, and the guard's face hardened. I was proud of my mother, of her strength. Even if I didn't feel like I had any of it.

"Your daughter," he began, a pause as cold as the words that followed as he counted us, even me, little more than a scrap of cloth and skin between my parents, "is one of only six people left in this gods-forsaken land who will do as you tell them. I encourage you to insist she do as I tell her to."

My mother and father were joined by my sisters and Jurnus, who leapt to his feet with such vigor he might have had in his hands again the weapons that had been taken from him. I swallowed, hard. The guard did not need the soldiers waiting in the corridor to cut my family down. I could no longer see his face through the living barrier of their bodies, but I wouldn't feed his thirsty spear.

I rose, ankles weak as water, and touched my mother on the shoulder, and then my father.

"I'll go," I said, whisper-stiff. Their looks were as knife-edged as their parting bodies as I passed between them, hips and elbows thin from many hungry months in the desert. My sisters' expressions were curious and Jurnus' nostrils flared in indignation when I ignored the short, sharp shake of his head. They were all wondering the same thing and I was, too: Why did he want me when he could've had one of them?

I crossed the stone serpent's belly, following the design with my eyes to keep from looking at the guard. The serpent was fat with swallowed prey, a warning to intruders that crossing the royal family would cost them their lives. But not anymore. Our resistance might cost us ours, and it appeared I would be the first to go.

Before they bolted the door again behind me I caught my mother's eyes, saw in their depths a prescient gloom. She raised a hand as though to shield tears, but I knew better. I knew her thoughts, that she believed she would never see me again. She didn't want to remember me this way, the defeated sink of my shoulders, the shallow, surrendering scrape of my sandal.

But it was too late. For all of us.

CHAPTER TWO

The guard didn't look at me as we passed through the corridor from the reliquary, didn't speak. The soldiers barred and locked the door again behind us, but I heard instead the sounds of shattering wood and the terrible scream of steel against stone. In the caves where we had been captured we had waited hours in the dark, tasked to hear the death of each man and woman who had sworn to preserve our lives at the cost of their own. I saw again the first soldier I had seen up close, her grim lips and bared teeth in the torchlight, bloodied spear brandished as one of my servants twitched his last on the cave floor between us. I'd been so afraid I could have trembled out of the ropes she'd used to bind me. I felt the ghosts of those ropes tighten around my wrist and ankles now, fighting to follow the man who stalked before me.

I feared him, too, giving him no reason to touch me, no reason to raise his voice in anger. We took a winding stair that opened on to a wide, brushed stone landing: a bright place where we had played as children. I didn't recognize the broad leafed, flowering plants growing there now or the imported heavy wooden furniture. The somber faces carved into the arms of chairs told me all that I needed to know: you are not welcome to sit here, you do not belong.

The guard took a position at the top of the stair, like a block of stone or wood himself barring the exit. Two figures stood opposite me behind a narrow table, a woman and a man standing nearly the same height. They regarded me with a grave curiosity that chilled me more than the guard's callous attentions. I couldn't help but stare, my lips parting in the witless expression one of my sisters was like to take with a handsome man. These two were not soldiers. The man wore a half-mask roughed of some metal fitted to his features, riding the bridge of his nose and curving back to his ears. It was the mask I saw and little else, registering but barely the sandy hair, the thin, blank line of his lips. His eyes were fixed on me, and I fought the urge to squirm under the cool, measured notice I received.

The woman's expression was intelligent, stirring uncommon beauty in an otherwise common face. She drew her dark curls severely back from her face, and a sliver of glinting metal marked her brow above soft, too-kind eyes. I didn't want them to be kind. It had taken all my nerve to follow the guard this far, and now I felt even more alone, more vulnerable. I opened and closed my mouth once, twice, dumb as a grazing animal when there is nothing left to eat. Their unwavering attention could have galvanized even the slowest of beasts, however, and I found words where there had been none.

"I don't know what you hope to gain from me."

The woman's expression was shrewd, but not cruel. She looked away from me for a moment, catching the man's eyes. I sensed the stir of something between them, the unspoken understanding that can pass between two people who know each other well. After a moment, he turned and walked out onto the high walled balcony that circled much of the room. His dark clothing seemed to gather and repel light in the same instant, and I didn't like not having them both in the room where I could see them. But when he was gone she spoke, her voice husky like that of a much older woman, pleasant and deep, and I had to look at her.

"Don't be alarmed. We wanted to meet with you alone. I am *Dresha* Morainn, daughter of -"

"I know whose daughter you are."

She didn't need to wear the circlet for me to know. Morainn was their princess, soon to succeed her father, no doubt. Of course we were meeting alone. If she hoped to negotiate, she was wise to keep her distance from my brother and sisters.

"Eiren," I answered, though I knew she didn't need my name. I was stalling, unsure of what to say to her, to this kind-eyed princess of monsters. "Are you going to interrogate my brother and sisters, too?"

"No."

She moved around the table, hands skirting papers, implements for writing and measuring distance, inks in tinted glass bottles. This was a familiar place for her but not for me, not anymore. I bristled, and as she drew nearer her full frame and considerable height made me feel weak as a foundling child. Morainn had eaten well and stretched her legs in the flower of her youth, and I'd spent the last five years living like a rodent in a cave.

"I'm not going to hurt you," she continued, casting her eyes out to the veranda where the man stood, his head tilted slightly, listening. Morainn's voice was calm, cool, as though she were attempting to subdue me. "So you needn't act like I'm going to."

Had she spoken with my sisters in this fashion, they would have been at her throat already, if not with a knife than with words, at least. One of them would at least have insulted her height.

"That is difficult for me to accept," I countered, baring blistered wrists, ragged nails, bruises yellowing with age from where I had been dragged across the cavern floor.

Morainn looked away, exposing a profile that was as commanding as her height. For a moment I thought she might shout, the jut of her lip petulant, like a child. I chewed my own in a moment's hesitation. A lifetime of war had taught me little about our enemy, but I'd seen more than murders. My hands hooked against my bare arms, feeling again the bite of other hands, the soldier that had taken hold of me and bound me to a pack animal to be driven back to the capitol. A flood of hatred had accompanied his touch, for I needed even less than his sneer to know the depth of his feelings. He could not have known that in his face, when he had touched me, I had seen the face of every one of my people he had killed to reach me.

Just as Morainn could not know what I saw in her, next.

"I know," she said, her voice soft and hard at the same time, features as still as the horizon bleached white in the morning. "If we'd known, you would have been spared."

Something slipped between us and it was like a colored lens passed over my eyes, some thought of hers that I could no more snatch from the air than I could a mote of dust. I resisted the moon-pull of her thoughts as I always did the thoughts of strangers, not because I was afraid of her, as I had been with the soldiers, but because I was afraid of what I might see. I held my breath. The man outside turned toward us, no more bothering with even the pretense of our privacy, his face without distinction in the strong sunlight.

There was no stopping it. I was flooded with her impression of me, a figure of myth who didn't resemble me in the least. I wasn't a person to her, but a means to something I did not understand. I was a tool.

And she feared me.

I was spared scrambling for a response by the man, who abandoned the terrace to rejoin Morainn.

"What she means is that you are not what we expected, *Han'dra* Eiren," he said, his tone empty and the formal address putting distance between us. Where Morainn had felt curious and sorrowful and alive, this man didn't seem to feel anything. "You've changed things."

I stood motionless, ferreting out the heart sounds of my family elsewhere in the palace to ground me. Their thoughts were clouded, anxious, distant. A storm of confusion and fear tumbled thunder in my gut, and I thought I might be sick, empty what meager breakfast they'd given us in one of the foolish potted plants they'd imported. He addressed me as though he had

all of the answers and I none, like I was an ignorant child. What I had seen in Morainn retreated, and what I was left with, just myself, didn't seem like enough. I could do things no one else could, knew things I had no business knowing. But I had still been surprised to be singled out, as my brother and sisters had been, my mother and father, too. Perhaps they had been even more surprised.

"What do you want? Tell me." I managed, quiet but firm. Morainn softened, features falling as easily as the drape of her skirt, though the man seemed as unaffected as before.

"No," he said simply. There was a subtle change in his temper, like an offering of water after a hot day's fasting. I read a promise in his shaded eyes and tight mouth: he wouldn't tell me yet.

He was less formidable in proximity than he had been at a distance. I could not keep from studying his face as the moment lengthened to discomfort, the rough lip of the mask below his cheekbones, splitting his brow above. His hair strayed from where it had been smoothed back, softening his unnaturally muted expression. Morainn interrupted what might have become a battle of wills between the man and I, each of us silent and stubborn as stones.

"You're afraid for your family. I can offer you their protection."

Morainn had the power to promise me what she offered. I didn't need to look into her mind to know it but I did anyway, because I could. She was far easier to read than her brother, for the man was her brother, the blood bond between them as fierce as the sun's blaze on the terrace. Only my nerves had kept me from seeing it before. Whatever her motives, she meant what she said.

"Why would you do that?"

"Because I want you to return with us. Without a fight."

I gaped. I couldn't help it. Morainn didn't understand the full scope of what she asked of me, but her brother did, and it was his attention to my response I was more shaken by than the request itself. I looked at him, but couldn't hold his eyes for more than a moment. He wanted me to answer, and I didn't want to.

"I don't have a choice, do I?" I asked at last, my stomach hardening as though I had swallowed stones enough to fill it.

"No." Even as her brother spoke Morainn laid a hand upon his arm, softening his blunt answer with another question.

"Would you really choose not to go?" She was trying to tempt me with what she had promised in return, my family's freedom in exchange for mine, but in that moment I was only painfully aware of the tenderness between Morainn and her brother. It was nothing like the little rivalries and competitions between my siblings and I. If they'd been here, their opinions and actions would all have been wildly different, though they would all have felt their choices worthier than mine, too. Wasn't I the youngest, the quietest, the coward? I wasn't a leader. Blood or grain spilled, a man's head cut from his neck or a flower torn from its stem, I could and had only ever sat idle. Because only I could see what acting rashly might bring. I could see into the hearts and minds of others and it stilled my hands, and my sisters and brother, my mother and father, they couldn't understand. Nobody else could.

But Morainn and her brother wanted me. I didn't know why, but did it matter? She was right. I wouldn't say no.

"If I go with you, they'll live? A proper life. Not one in chains." The Eiren that had been content to wait out the war in exile would never have made such a demand without the support of her family, but she'd never been asked, either, how she might've changed things. She had never been alone.

I watched Morainn until I was satisfied that her nod of consent was truthful. My parents would never rule again, but they would be safe. That was enough. Though I felt again the strange impression Morainn had of me, that I was not a person but a tool, I had made my choice. Morainn raised her hand and the guard that had been my escort made room for me to pass back down the stair.

But her brother wasn't ready for me to leave. His eyes caught mine as I made to turn, arresting.

"You are more than a tool, *Han'dra* Eiren."