

Chapter 2

“Your Royal Highness, we have arrived.”

Princess Ava pulled aside the curtain of the carriage and looked out. There in the darkness rose up the great castle, surrounded by a moat over which a bridge was being lowered. The brilliance of the stars was reflected in the moat below, the sky and the water shimmering, sparkling, illuminating the night.

As she watched, the drawbridge hit the other side with a grinding thud, and she heard the sound of hooves travelling across the wooden planks, the sweet music of bells. She could see the shadows of several horsemen coming towards her, and she pulled the curtain further back, peering out, wondering if her future husband was amongst the welcome party.

Then she saw him, the prince, for there was no one else he could be. His golden hair and the bells on his white horse shone in the starlight. She jerked the curtain closed, her heart in her throat. She had never imagined him so beautiful.

She could hear the horses just outside, boots hitting the gravel of the road, then footsteps moving towards her carriage. Her heart pounded in her ears and heat flushed up her neck. She tried to keep her face impassive, to still that reckless beating.

“I present to you, Her Royal Highness The Princess Ava.” The words were proclaimed loudly, and they rang in her ears.

The door of her carriage was pulled open by the footman, and a perfect white hand reached in. This was the first part of him she saw, those long slender fingers, the rounded nails, searching for her in the darkness. As though in a dream, she took it and allowed herself to be led out under that brilliant night sky. She kept her head lowered, but at last was overwhelmed by the desire to see him, and she looked up through her eyelashes. She had the odd sensation of falling through the stars above them.

He was far lovelier than any woman she had ever seen. Long golden locks flowed thick and lustrous over his shoulders, his brow was high and proud, his eyes a piercing blue and there was a sensuality to his rosebud lips. He was tall and slim, and as he led her from the carriage, his movements were those of a dancer. On seeing her gaze up at him, he smiled at her.

“Your Royal Highness,” he said, bending low over her hand, pressing it to that still smiling mouth. A shiver ran through her.

“I trust your journey was well?”

“Very well, Your Highness,” she murmured, hardly knowing what she was saying.

“Your room has been prepared for you. Everything is ready,” he said. Now, she noticed that those blue eyes were looking her over searchingly, that this beautiful prince was himself trying to understand something of his future bride.

“I am very grateful,” was all she could muster. How did she measure up to him?

He bowed to her again, then brought her to his horse.

*He raised her up on his milk-white steed,
Himself on a dappled grey;
And he has led her away with him,
Six hours before it is day.*

The ceremony took place in the palace gardens. She walked alone down an aisle of petals, to where Oren stood at the end, dressed in a white suit covered in leaves made of green emeralds. She did not see the gathered crowd, letting Oren consume her vision. Before them stood a priest in a cloak of deep green, next to a newly planted myrtle sapling.

The wedding seemed to last an eternity. In the summer sun, under the layers of heavy golden fabric, sweat dripped down Ava’s back, and she was glad of the veil that hid her features, so she would not have to arrange them carefully. Through it she watched Oren. Always, there was a soft smile on his lips, and his eyes danced around the garden, laughing at some private joke.

When it came time for their vows, Oren brought his eyes to her, as the priest before them lifted a knife. It glittered gold in the sun and he took a lock of Ava’s dark hair. Ava held her breath, her whole body tense, afraid she would flinch away. There was a strange scratching sound as the knife ripped through the lock, and then the priest knelt and placed it at the base of the sapling. She watched him perform the same action with a lock of Oren’s golden hair, and she felt almost mournful, it seemed such a shame to mar him.

“May your love bloom, your hearts be gentle and enduring.” She looked to Oren, and he nodded. She repeated the words smooth, practiced and sure. No one would hear the fluttering inside her. When it was his turn, she noticed a tightening at his mouth. He clipped off the end of the last word, as though he could not quite speak it. Registering the hesitation, Ava felt a flicker of resentment. What had he lost?

The priest knelt and lay his hands at the base of the sapling. Oren took her hand, and pulled her back slightly. The tree began to grow, up, up into the sky. Beneath her veil she allowed herself to stare. She had rarely seen magic performed. Curling around the myrtle’s trunk was a pattern of black and gold. Its branches spread out, buds unfurling and filling the palace gardens with pink blooms.

It was done. The treaty was sealed. The war was over.

They were seated at the top of the table and she watched the court from her birds-eye view. In the hall of Aumar there was the same war weariness that had come upon the court of her father. She felt a vindictive satisfaction that the lives and gold spent in the pursuit of Termon had weighed just as heavily in this strange land.

Two seats to Oren's right was a man with the same golden hair and blue eyes. She saw a flash of metal upon his head, and with a jolt, realised this must be King Adrian. White-hot anger rang through her and she fought to keep her face composed. She could see the resemblance to his son, but he was tall and broad and had none of his delicate beauty.

"You will learn another side of him," Oren whispered in her ear. She started, and glanced at him, unable to hide her fear at having been so understood.

"I am sure there is much his people love about him."

Oren nodded, his face solemn.

"He is loved, among other things, but when you know him as I do—," he trailed off, uncertain of how to defend his father to her.

"When I know him better, I'll love him as you do, Your Highness," she said quickly.

He had a troubled look on his face at that.

"Surely between husband and wife, we should be known by our names?"

"If that is what you wish." She smiled up at him.

"It is, Ava," he replied. A thrill went through her, her name in his mouth sounded so little. Exhausted by the day, and her long weeks of travel, she fell into silence. In his presence, she was entirely unable to express anything of herself. She focused on her plate, taking small delicate bites, smiling politely, but avoiding the eyes that were trained upon her. So she did not see him approach, until he cast a shadow upon her.

She looked up and went completely still, staring into the face of her new father-in-law. He smiled at her warmly and she saw it was the same look as that of his son.

"Princess Ava, you're as lovely as the stories say."

Her mouth had gone dry, but she forced herself to reply,

“You’re very kind, Your Majesty,” biting back the stories she had heard of him.

“Your father tells me you play beautifully, would you entertain the court tonight?” She watched the smile play on his lips, and she thought it was not quite as warm as she first thought. Perhaps he hoped a further humiliation for King Izar.

“Of course, if you have an instrument.” He nodded and withdrew, indicating for her to walk out before the crowd of strangers. Her hands wanted to shake, but she held them tightly to her sides and tried not to think about how her nerves would affect the movement of her fingers. Her chin high, she stood to her full height, walking with a sureness her heart did not possess.

A seat was carried out for her and an instrument of shining maple placed in her hands. She tested the strings, they had already been tuned. As she was about to start, she looked up. The hall was silent, a crowd of unknowable faces looking at her. Right before her on the banquet table was a formidable knight. He was glaring at her with eyes as black as coals. She retreated the only way she could, closing her eyes and letting her fingers find the strings in the lonely darkness. Then she played. If Adrian had sought to shame her, he would be disappointed, for many years of practice and discipline moved through her, let her fingers dance nimbly across the instrument. She thought of Anora, holding her before their bedroom window, and she filled her music with longing for her sister, her home, let it ache through her.

Only after the piece ended did she open her eyes, and saw before her again those black coals. She stared, unable to look away from that weatherworn face surrounded by dark wild curls. As though from far away she heard polite applause. A serving man took the instrument from her hands, breaking the gaze of the knight.

She turned quickly, not wanting to be caught in that glare, and returned to her seat beside Oren. He looked at her appraisingly.

“Perhaps you can play for me tonight,” was all he said.

For the rest of the meal he paid her no more mind, and she could not bring herself to begin again their conversation. He was in his court, surrounded by those he knew. Beside him she sat still and cold as a stone left out in the night air, feeling utterly separate from the warm glow of the celebration, and with no sense of how she could breach the distance that lay between herself and this new world that was to be her home.

It was not until they had been led to their newly furnished chambers that he spoke to her again. He was turned away from her, looking out into the darkness of the night. She had not walked more than a step into the room before her feet had failed her. She knew what was to come, and alone with only him, she found herself unable to conceal her fear.

“There is a lyre for you in the corner. Play for me.” She found it quickly, and rather than go to the bed, she went to the settee before it, pulling up her knees, curling in on herself, before she began to play.

He walked to the bed before turning slowly to look at her. Her hands would not stop shaking even as she braced them against the instrument, and her music started stuttering and awkward. He watched her a while, slowly lowering onto the bed. The distance he kept let her relax, and the music flowed more easily. Then he joined her in song. His tenor was lovely as a woman’s and he sang with a wistfulness that belied the nature of the words.

*Pull off, pull off your silken gown,
And deliver it unto me;
It looks far too rich and too fine
To rot in the salt water sea.*

*Pull off, pull off your silken stays,
And deliver them unto me;
It looks far too rich and too fine
To rot in the salt water sea.*

*Pull off, pull off your cotton smock,
And deliver it unto me;
It looks far too rich and too fine
To rot in the salt water sea.*

He stopped his singing, and she paused a moment.

“Please continue, the music you make is terribly sweet,” he said. She played and he began again to sing. The warmth of gratitude came over her. Where words had failed her, he had found a way to breach the distance between them. Through music Ava could share something of what lay locked in her.

At last he rose from the bed and stepped forward. Her fingers faltered.

“Please don’t stop,” he said, and she obeyed. He walked to her and sat by her side. Slowly he ran his lovely long fingers through her dark locks, and then down her neck. She dared not look at him, focusing instead on the instrument in her hands as he undid the lacing of her dress, pulling the sleeves down to reveal her shoulder, laying his soft lips against it. Still she played on as his kisses travelled up her neck, to the base of her ear, until all she could hear was the hammering of her heart in her ears, her breath that came short and ragged. Her fingers became clumsy and unsure until at last they stopped. The last note she plucked hung in the air. He whispered in her ear,

*Oh take me by the arm, my dear,
And hold me by the hand,
And I will make you my fair bride
And lady of all my land,*

Then he took the lyre from her limp hands and led her to the marriage bed. She followed him, and he laid her down on the silk sheets with a tenderness that she had never dared to hope for.