

## CHAPTER 1



Gwendoline was awakened by the sound of a trumpet-like horn, fear gripping her heart as she dressed faster than she had ever dressed before in her life. She grabbed a pair of knives from a dusty chest before sneaking out to the town square, adrenaline flooding her veins. The sudden invasion took the people of Esterron by surprise, many of them raising whatever arms they could muster in defence of their land while others, perhaps understandably, hid. The battle, if it could be called that, was mercifully quick but no less bloody for it.

They never stood a chance.

By dusk, it was over, and leaning against a stone wall, her mind and body weary, Gwendoline rested for a moment, too tired to collect her thoughts in any meaningful sense. The next thing she knew, two burly soldiers with gruff manners were twisting the weapons out of her hands and roughly manhandling her out of the corridor, informing her that she would be brought before the newly crowned King Theil. As hard as she struggled, she could not break out of their strong grasp, though that did not stop her from trying until she was pushed inside the throne room, almost falling to her feet from the force.

When she finally gathered herself and looked up, she found herself momentarily speechless when she saw the most beautiful man she had ever seen sitting imperiously—arrogantly, even—on the throne. The usurper, wearing her fallen king's crown, appeared to be in his mid-thirties, was tall and lithe, though his deceptively slim form belied his broad shoulders and elegantly sculpted chest. He had striking blue eyes that held a coldness that almost made her shiver, sharp cheekbones and shimmering platinum hair that fell to his waist, resting ramrod-straight along his back as if commanded there by his will, not a hair of which seemed disturbed by the bloody battle. She tried not to stare and failed, and to her dismay, it seemed he had caught her staring if the small smirk on his face was any indication.

"So, this is the girl who killed two of my men," he said in a low, velvet voice.

Gwendoline was only in her early twenties, but at five-foot-eight, with round hips and full breasts, she could hardly be mistaken for a *girl*. She was at an age when she began to attract the attention of suitors, whether because they admired her milky skin, her large, expressive brown eyes and long golden-brown hair or her quick wit and confidence. She suspected he called her that in an attempt to patronise her and she did not like it.

"I was protecting my people from invaders. What else should I have done?"

"Quite," Theil replied, a small smile on his lips as he inspected the knives that were handed to him by a guard. "I did not realise Esterronis armed their women."

"My father gave them to me as a child and taught me how to fight."

"He is a soldier?"

"A blacksmith."

She did not know why she was telling him this. As her numbness from the surreal nature of the situation was just beginning to

recede, she began to vibrate with anger at the invader sitting on the throne.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Gwendoline."

"You will address me properly."

"Gwendoline, *your Grace*," she said with as much sarcasm as she could muster in her state of exhaustion and braced herself for an admonishment that never came.

"The battle is done, Gwendoline. You may put down your arms," he said as he threw up one of her knives and caught it deftly with his hand. "It is over."

"Not while an imposter sits on Esterron's throne," she spat back, meeting his eyes defiantly.

He moved so quickly, she could barely track the movement until he was towering above her, his body inches from hers, as he gripped her jaw firmly in his hand in a way that restricted her movement but without causing any real pain. There was a certain mastery to his movements that somehow unsettled her even further. She felt an acute fear flood her body and, to her surprise and deep shame, a small ripple of arousal. She tried to hide both emotions behind a neutral expression. A small smile on the king's lips told her she had failed in both endeavours as he tilted his head to eye her with curiosity.

"Kneel," he whispered as he continued to stare at her with an intense gaze.

"Pardon?" she asked, suddenly unsure of herself, her mind bombarding her with images that made her heart beat so fast in fear that she was sure it was audible.

"Bend the knee to your new king and swear fealty. I will not punish you for killing my men in battle, but I will not tolerate disobedience or disloyalty."

Gwendoline took a deep breath and summoned all her courage while trying to ignore the terrifying and slightly distracting proximity of his body.

"Never."

"Then you will be thrown in the dungeons until you have learned some respect."

"I will never respect someone who took my kingdom by force and killed my people."

"Pity," he replied as his gaze flitted between her eyes and lips, making warmth pool low in her stomach for reasons she could not identify. "Then you will rot in the dungeons."

Without giving her a chance to reply, his hand left her jaw and, with a small wave of his hand, signalled to his guards to remove her. She was still formulating her response when she felt strong hands drag her out of the room, not ceasing until she found herself in a cold, squalid cell with little light. Only then did she allow herself to weep for her people and then for herself.



THE TIME she spent in the dungeon was one of the worst weeks of her life. The cell was filthy and cold, and Gwendoline had to endure spending the whole week wondering whether her family and her friends had survived the invasion. She wondered if they knew where she was or if they thought she had died in the battle, but any attempts to mine the guards for information or request that a message be sent to her family were rebuffed immediately.

She had refused to bend the knee to King Theil—just thinking about him sitting on the throne filled her with incandescent rage—but the more time she spent in the dungeons, the more she realised she was fighting a hopeless battle. Perhaps the best thing she could do for her family was to tell him whatever he wanted to hear so she could be with her people during this difficult time. She did not have to mean it. She would address him by whatever title he wanted and return to her life and her family. It took a while, but her mind was made up by the time a guard unexpectedly woke her in the middle of the night and hauled her towards the king's cham-

bers. If he wanted a display of fealty, she would give it to him, she decided.

She found the king sitting at his desk, fingers tapping on the solid wood distractedly. He was dressed in fine opulent robes instead of armour but looked no less deadly for it. His strong brow was furrowed, as if deep in thought. She took a deep breath before approaching closer. As soon as she took a step inside the room, his sharp azure eyes snapped to hers, pinning her to the spot with such weight that she felt unable to move.

"I know who you are," Theil said quietly, his voice deep and cold.

"Yes, your Grace," she answered wryly in spite of herself. "We have met."

Theil said nothing in response, simply indicating for her to sit down in the chair before him, which made her suddenly uneasy. She was not sure what she expected from him but she could feel the sudden shift in his demeanour. Last time they spoke, there was a certain warmth to him, as odd as it felt to banter—for want of a better word—with someone who invaded her land and slaughtered her people. That warmth was now gone and it left Gwendoline feeling the icy cold of the season more acutely. She sat down as instructed and nervously waited for him to continue.

"I must say, you are a very good liar," Theil finally said, his eyes tracing her face as if searching for something.

"Your Grace?"

"A blacksmith's daughter, really... they covered the tracks well, I will give them that. But they let you keep your name. If it were not for that, I might have never found out."

Gwendoline could only stare at him, unsure of how to respond. It would be fair to say that she was extremely confused but she wondered whether it would be wise to admit it or if saying nothing would allow her to gather more information before she revealed her ignorance.

Theil looked at her expectantly, like he was waiting for an

explanation, and she was powerless to give him one. Taking a deep breath, she dismissed her earlier thoughts and decided to be honest. There was something about this man that gave her the impression that he would be able to see through any façade that she tried to place before him and she saw little sense in trying.

"I do not know what you are talking about," she replied cautiously, quietly.

"I suppose I understand now why you remained to defend your city instead of fleeing."

"Your Grace?"

"Though I daresay, it would have been much safer for you to flee, given who you are. That was brave of you, and foolish."

She continued to stare at him with vacant eyes, confusion marring her features, until his perceptive eyes finally saw something in her expression that gave him pause.

"You do not know what I am talking about, do you? How could you *not* know?"

"Know what?"

"They should have told you. If they had told you, I suppose you might have fled. It appears I was fortunate that they made this decision."

"Your Grace?" None of this was making any sense.

"You are not the daughter of a blacksmith," Theil sighed, a note of exhaustion in his voice. "Your father was Abadias. Your mother was Alyssa."

"*King* Abadias?" she asked, baffled. Surely, he meant someone else or, more likely, was confusing her with another.

"Yes. You were only a baby when they were murdered. It seems a quick decision was made to hide you, by friends of the family. You were placed with the blacksmith whom the family trusted for some reason or another that I have been unable to discern but which matters little. Your identity was changed. But they kept your first name. That was their mistake."

"My father is Bart. My mother is Hannah."

"No."

"The princess was murdered."

"No. She was not," Theil replied with conviction. He frowned, adding, "You really did not know?"

Gwendoline shook her head as a slight shiver rippled down her spine. What he said was preposterous. She was not some long-missing princess. She was the daughter of a blacksmith and a cook. She was sure Theil was mistaken, but her mind joined the dots quickly and she realised that even if that were the case, what mattered was who he believed her to be, not who she really was.

She felt her panic mount as her stomach clenched painfully. She should run. She should run right now.

But before she could do anything or even open her mouth, he spoke once more, confirming her worst fears. "You understand that I cannot let an heiress to the throne run around free."

"Are you going to kill me?" she asked bluntly, briefly looking around for escape paths, even as she realised that she would not even reach the door before his guards cut her down.

"I should, really," he replied with a hint of regret in his voice. "It would be safer to do so. But I offer you an alternative. Marriage."

"You wish to marry me?" Gwendoline was taken aback; that this was not what she expected would be a huge understatement.

"Yes. It would neutralise the threat."

"I am not a threat to you. I am finding it difficult to believe what you are telling me, but even if I were the princess—"

"You are."

"I still have no desire for the throne. I know nothing of ruling a kingdom and I have no such ambitions."

"Perhaps not, perhaps not at this moment. But your heart might change. If I let you go, even if I exile you, you will remain a potential threat to the legitimacy of my rule."

"Your rule is illegitimate," she snapped back, unable to stop herself even as she realised the immense danger of her words. "You murdered the rightful ruler of Esterron."

"As it turns out, I did not." He chuckled darkly. "For she stands before me now, unharmed."

Gwendoline took a deep breath as she contemplated her options, which appeared to be rather limited. She could choose death. She would be executed but at least she would die honourably, which is the most anyone can ever really hope for. Her family would mourn her and it would break their hearts, but when so many of her people had already died, what was one more soul lost in the collective grief? On the other hand, she could marry the man who invaded her realm and brutally slaughtered anyone who resisted.

She tried to remove the vague attraction she felt towards him out of the equation; it was shameful enough as it was, without allowing it to affect her deliberations.

"I need time to think."

"You need time to decide whether marrying me is better than death?" He smiled, amused despite the circumstances.

"Yes."

"I am afraid that you do not have this luxury but perhaps it would help to inform your decision if you had more information about what our marriage would be like."

Gwendoline nodded, her stomach clenching painfully in trepidation.

"I wish for you to rule with me, not just play the role of loving wife and devoted queen in public. I understand that you have received first-rate tutoring that has given you a comprehensive education, which, I might add, should have tipped you off that you were no mere blacksmith's daughter."

"My father told me that the tutor was a loyal customer of his and that he provided the tutoring as payment in kind."

"I am certain that your adopted father is very skilled at his craft," Theil scoffed, "but there is no blacksmith on earth who can afford the kind of tutoring that was provided to you, payment in kind or not."



"So that is why—"

"It is more than that. You know these people. You understand their culture and their problems. You grew up poor, so you understand their plight. You would provide invaluable counsel."

"You wish for me to rule with you so that I can help you solidify and maintain your control over my own people?" Gwendoline asked sharply, even as she felt herself blush.

"Yes," Theil replied bluntly, "but there is more to it than that. I wish to be a strong ruler, yes, but I also wish to be a good one, as I believe I have been in Candelonia. With your education and background, I imagine you already have reforms in mind that would benefit them. If you become my queen, you would have the chance to execute some of them. If they are any good, I mean. You will not have free rein."

"Are you offering this as an inducement so I will agree to marry you?" Gwendoline asked suspiciously.

"I do not need to offer anything as, I am afraid, I do not require your agreement to marry you. I offer this because it is what I want and I seek your agreement to the marriage because that too is something I desire."

It seemed so simple, in a way, and Gwendoline despaired when she realised she could only give one answer. She was not afraid of dying but she refused to die for nothing, especially if the alternative meant she might have the chance to improve conditions for her people. Gwendoline hated the idea of collaborating with a usurper of the throne but if Theil was right about her identity—which she still doubted to a degree, though it did make a number of things suddenly make sense—the throne was hers by right. She did not know if she could trust him. Indeed, it would have been foolish to trust a man she had just met with something so monumental but she supposed she had no choice. There was just one more thing that she wanted to know.

"Presumably the marriage would have to be... consummated," she murmured as she blushed all over.

"Yes," Theil replied in a husky voice that suddenly dropped an octave. "I promise you that you will be *very* satisfied."

"That is not what I meant!" she squeaked in an altogether undignified way.

"I know," he whispered, his eyes shimmering. "Just another, as you say, inducement."

"You do not think your words might have had the opposite effect?"

"Not if your dilated pupils and quickened heart rate are any indication," he smirked.

Gwendoline cursed herself for the way her treacherous body gave her away. Even if she was attracted to him in some vague, unfamiliar way, that did not mean she did not feel a significant degree of trepidation at the idea of being bedded by the cruel, arrogant king, to say nothing of her resentment of him. But she knew that if she agreed, she would have no say in the matter. The marriage would have to be consummated but she could deal with that when the time came. She took a deep breath and met his eyes.

"I will marry you," she said resolutely, a dangerous warmth settling in her stomach at the small seemingly genuine smile he gave her in response.

"Splendid. I will make all the arrangements. From here on, you will live in the palace."

"Your Grace," she frowned, "I cannot share your bed before we are married."

Theil's warm laugh reverberated around the room, making her feel simultaneously more relaxed and more nervous. It was such a lovely sound yet a sharp contrast to the murky waters of the preceding conversation.

"No, indeed. You will be assigned your own rooms in the palace while we prepare for the wedding. You have my word that nothing untoward will happen before then, no matter how much you may desire it."

Gwendoline opened her mouth to protest before she realised he

was teasing her. He looked so much younger and less stern when he smiled like that. It was yet another dangerous thought that she tried not to dwell on. She said nothing as she found herself being escorted out of the room by a servant.

"Oh, and, Gwendoline?" he called just as she was almost out of the door. "I will soon be sharing a bed with you and I would be remiss if I did not inform you, in case you have any designs on my life or you ever find yourself reaching for your knives, that if any harm should come to me at your hands, your adopted family will be executed without a second thought."

Gwendoline nodded, her unexpectedly warm mood soured, as she allowed herself to be led towards her new chambers, exhaustion claiming her body as her adrenaline receded.



THE NEXT WEEK was spent preparing for a lavish, stately wedding, the likes of which Gwendoline had never seen, at the same time as she was adjusting to the surreal feeling of finding herself living in luxury after two decades of austerity and destitution.

It seemed there were thousands of decisions to be made regarding the ceremony and to her chagrin, she was expected to weigh in on at least some of them, despite her complete indifference to and unfamiliarity with the subject matter. Her mind would wander to her neighbours who often struggled to feed their children, which never failed to make her feel guilty about the extravagance of the wedding. To her immense gratitude, the staff in charge of making the preparations quickly realised that she had no interest in contributing anything whatsoever to the wedding plans and approached her for her thoughts less and less as the week wore on.

During this time, Theil would often visit her for afternoon tea or dinner as they discussed their plans for the wedding and after. It gave her a chance to get to know him and she was surprised to find herself rather enjoying spending time with him, which perhaps

inevitably filled her with guilt. He could be cold and ruthless, as she discovered during the invasion, and the more she learned about some of the decisions he had made that night, the more she was shocked by his cruelty. At the same time, his interest in her views about what could be done to improve the lives of her people seemed genuine and he appeared keen to discuss them with her whenever the opportunity presented itself. She struggled to reconcile those two opposing sides of him.

Gwendoline enjoyed his company and the surprising warmth he showed her, and the more time they spent together, the more her vague attraction towards him grew. She supposed it did not hurt that he was strikingly beautiful, an unusual combination of brutal strength and delicate grace, but she doubted that she would have felt much for him had it not been for his magnetic personality, the way he could not help but project power and dominance and his quick wit. This was how she found herself sharing a drink with him in her chambers two nights before their wedding, as he reclined on a settee opposite hers.

"Will you tell anyone who I am?" She was still not completely convinced that she was who he believed her to be but her doubts diminished over time.

"It will be announced after the ceremony but before your coronation."

"In case I flee before then?" she joked.

"Yes," was his blunt answer. "Though I do not think that you would, somehow."

Gwendoline felt herself blush at his suggestive tone. She was becoming used to him teasing her—flirting with her, even—but the idea of him bedding her still filled her with dread. It did, however, remind her of something that had been weighing on her mind.

"The wedding ceremony requires us to kiss." It was a statement that came out more as a question.

"It does. Does this worry you?"

"No. Yes. I suppose. I have never kissed anyone before."

"You are untouched?" Theil asked, his eyes visibly darkening.

"Yes," she said quietly, embarrassed. "You did not know and you wished to marry me regardless?"

"I understand that virginity is something that many men value but to be frank, I do not care one way or the other. Although, having said this, I do find myself... *interested* in being the first to introduce you to a myriad of exquisite pleasures."

The slightly hungry look on his face left no doubt as to what, exactly, he meant by 'interested' as Gwendoline felt a small shiver run down her spine.

"As for the kiss, if your concern is that our first kiss will take place in public, this is something we can remedy," Theil said as he walked over to Gwendoline, the long train of his gown trailing behind him. Gracefully perched beside her, their thighs almost touching, his gaze was full of desire, but he took no further action.

"You mean now?"

"If you wish. Only if you wish."

Gwendoline thought about it for a moment before nodding nervously. Theil's small smile relaxed her even as the heat in his eyes made her veins thrum with something akin to excitement, despite her nerves. She could only watch as he leaned in closer and carefully tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ears, and she realised she was holding her breath only when she exhaled sharply at the unexpectedly tender gesture.

"Do not look so frightened," he whispered with a confident smile. "You will enjoy this."

Before she could reply, he leaned in closer and, closing his eyes, pressed a chaste, featherlight kiss on her lips. Gwendoline froze for a long moment before she regained the power to move and, her heart beating impossibly quickly, began to reciprocate clumsily, reflexively sighing against his mouth at the soft kiss.

The more he kissed her, the more she felt her mind grow hazy, and when she felt his tongue briefly touch her lower lip, she parted her lips without conscious thought, her breathing growing deeper

when he gently slid his tongue against hers. The kiss was slow and sensual but gradually turning more heated, and Gwendoline could not help the soft moan that fell from her lips, too consumed by the feel and taste of his delicious mouth to feel embarrassed. Without thinking, she wrapped a small hand around his neck to try to pull him closer before she realised what she was doing with a start, and it was at this point that Theil finally broke the kiss.

When she opened her eyes, she saw his beautiful face, lightly flushed, his lips plump from being kissed, his heated eyes impossibly dilated. It was such an erotic sight that for a brief moment, she found herself moving closer to him to resume the kiss before he placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"I think that is enough for today," he whispered, his deep voice like gravel.

"Did you... not enjoy it?" Gwendoline asked in a small voice, confused about why he pulled away.

"On the contrary," Theil replied, his eyes burning with lust. "I enjoyed it so much that I fear that if we continue, I may not be able to stop myself."

A thrill ran down her spine at his words as she felt herself blush once more.

"I must go," he said, a hint of reluctance in his voice as he stood up to leave. "I can visit tomorrow if you would like that?"

"I would."

She felt a pleasant warmth all over her body as her lips tingled from his kiss. She watched until he was almost out the door before he turned back and gave her a mischievous smile.

"Until then, feel free to think about me when you are alone. I will be doing the same."

He was already gone when Gwendoline understood the meaning of his words, grateful that he was not around to see her blush deepen. She was chaste but this did not mean that she had never experienced pleasure by her own hand. Despite that, she was too embarrassed to pleasure herself to thoughts of him. As the

hours wore on and she struggled to fall asleep, lust still vibrating in her veins as she imagined him alone in his chambers, she found herself wishing she had not known how his lips felt against hers. She had no idea just a kiss could cause that kind of reaction and she now regretted bringing up the matter at all.

When Gwendoline finally fell asleep, she dreamed of long, silver hair, piercing blue eyes and soft, enticing lips.