

Chapter 1

The Southern Prince is an idiot, Syrenn thought to herself as she descended the spiraling tower stairs. The summer's day was bright and warm—the air swirled through one of the many open windows that speckled the stone walls of the castle. Early morning sun glittered gracefully against the calm waves of the sea far below the castle walls where the ships at the docks bobbed up and down with the light current.

Well, Syrenn supposed he would be the Southern King soon enough, considering the untimely passing of his father just last month. That had been quite a peculiar ordeal. Syrenn still couldn't understand it all, everything having happened so quickly. Not a lot made sense about it, either.

A ship had been discovered in the waters not far to the north of the Kingdom—abandoned. It was one of the Southern trading ships, sent on a journey to the Northern Kingdom of Kahnán. The ship that was found on its return voyage looked as if it had been attacked by pirates, Syrenn had been told. She thought that seemed strange since the contents of the ship had remained untouched. If it were pirates, surely they would have stripped the thing bare.

The Southern King saw to it that the ship was still unloaded, regardless of what had taken place. The King had quite a lucrative trade agreement with the Northern Kingdom. They sent a lovely array of crops and gems in exchange for the South's rare spices.

He seemed almost unfazed by the lack of crew aboard the ship. All he cared for was his goods, not his people. The contents were inspected, and everything was in order, including a new delicacy that had been promised by the Northern King. It was said to have been a charmed tea that brought the drinker immensely good luck.

That's what did him in, in the end. The King insisted on trying out that tea and wouldn't allow anyone to inspect it for poison before he drank his fill.

It turned out to be poisoned, obviously, causing him to go mad almost immediately. He went rabid, as if his mind had shriveled up inside his head, and he no longer held any of his own thoughts. He was no longer human, but more of a mindless husk.

Or so Syrenn had been told.

It was a horrid day all throughout the castle. The West Wing was locked from the outside, barring the girls from exiting. The King had to be put down. His eldest son was the one to do it, unsurprisingly. All the horrible deeds were thrust onto the King's eldest son, as had been the tradition for centuries. Most of these Southern traditions didn't make sense to Syrenn.

This was the way of things ever since the horrible rule of the First King of the South. The First King had been an eldest son as well. He and his brother had created this Kingdom—on the edges of the land of Nume—from nothing. He, being the eldest, took on the role of leader, while his younger brother watched from the sidelines. However, that elder son was a wicked thing who used his power to take what he wanted from whomever he wanted—who tortured and killed for sport.

Or so the fairytales say. The younger brother, having no choice, usurped the crown and banished the elder brother from the Southern Kingdom and this land altogether. And so it had been ever since. The King's crown would go to his second born son, for fear of history repeating itself.

Syrenn thought it was quite queer, indeed, when she had heard about the history of this Kingdom, and the ordeal with the most recent King. She was rather sad, too. The captain of that

particular trading ship had been a particularly handsome man whom she often found herself admiring from afar.

His eyes had matched the sea.

Syrenn had spent many an evening wishing she had jumped aboard that ship with the handsome captain. Most likely, she would have died with the rest of them, but at least she would no longer be caged in this castle. She hated the Southern Kingdom. She hated that her parents had sent her here. She hated their reasoning even more.

“A fine match indeed,” her mother had said when she read the summons. Syrenn could have died from shock when she learned of the arrangement. Her parents had petitioned the Southern King to allow her to join in as a contender for the Prince’s hand in marriage. It was maddening. She hadn’t asked for it, yet as soon as they received the final word, her parents packed her belongings and placed her on a ship heading east.

She was one of six girls expected to parade around, attend dinners and balls, and entertain the Prince. After learning more about them all, he was to select the one he admired most. That poor girl would become his wife, and eventually his Queen.

Syrenn had no desire to be queen. Her parents knew this, but they sent her anyway. She thought they just wanted to be rid of her. Life would be easier without her there. They could hardly enjoy themselves with their daughter of six and twenty trailing after them everywhere they went.

They were ashamed of her, really. To have a daughter reach that age, without any man showing an interest in her hand? She was a pariah amongst her peers. She was a stain upon her parents’ good name. It wasn’t as if Syrenn was unsightly. On the contrary, she was quite beautiful. Her hair was a unique, bright white that flowed to her waist. Her eyes were dark,

muddy puddles surrounded with long, thick lashes. Sharp cheekbones cut across her face in an intimidating manner, and those striking features were something that had been talked about amongst her male peers for years.

She had purposefully sabotaged every match her parents tried to make for her, though. She kept trying to sabotage this one as well, but for some reason, the Prince had yet to send her home. It made her wonder if her parents hadn't written anything extra in that petition...

Syrenn was content to never marry. After much begging, her parents finally agreed to grant her one condition before going to the Southern Kingdom. If the Prince chose another girl, Syrenn would be allowed to come home and live out her days as she wished. There would be no more harping from her parents about the matter. She would be free.

She had been in the Southern Kingdom for just over a year now. How she had made it this long without strangling Prince Gideon, she didn't know. He was quite handsome, that was true. But she could not get over his arrogance. She tried her hardest to quell her annoyance as she reached the final step of the tower, emerging into the main castle.

The West Wing was home to the six girls competing for the Prince's hand. The royals, as well as the parents of the girls, didn't want to risk anyone being able to wander into one of the girl's quarters in secret. So, because of this, the wing was sealed off from anyone except for staff. Since each girl was supposed to still be a maiden, they thought it best to keep everyone locked together in a single wing, as well as heavily guarded.

Supposed to be, Syrenn chuckled to herself. She didn't believe a single one of the girls—herself included—still carried their maidenhood with them. None of them voiced this aloud, of course, for fear of bringing shame upon their family names.

Syrenn's shoes clicked against the marble floor as she made her way down the corridor. When all the girls had arrived, somehow on the same exact day, there had been a debate on who would get which room. If they were to be locked in a cage, they might as well each have a room they could bear for the foreseeable future. There were fights amongst the girls on who would be staying in the largest room, closest to the stairs that led away from the wing. Syrenn's guess was that they had developed plans of sneaking out. Or on someone sneaking in. *Good for them*, she thought, though she did not share in this desire.

Oddly enough, no one wanted the tower room. Syrenn was thankful for this, because she didn't feel like arguing with anyone about why she should have the tower all to herself. She did not plan on having any visitors to her room and would rather keep to herself completely if she could. It also had the best view of the sea and of the ships that frequented the Kingdom. Though it was the farthest from escape, she realized, as she headed straight for Daphne's room.

Daphne was the youngest daughter of the King's most trusted advisor. She was also the only girl in the vicinity that Syrenn could tolerate. She had beautiful hickory-colored curls and the prettiest sage eyes. Her face was slightly rounded, with cheeks that were plastered with freckles. Not only was she beautiful, but she was the sweetest girl Syrenn had ever met. She treated everyone with utter kindness and love, no matter how they treated her in return.

She was most definitely going to be the Prince's wife.

Syrenn just wished the Prince would realize it and let the rest of them go home. Instead, he seemed to be enjoying the attentions of the girls a bit too much. She wondered if that was why they were all still there, a wife unchosen even after a year. His undeniable need to be desired outweighed any wishes he had of marriage. He had five girls flocking after him. What more could the man's pride want?

Syrenn rolled her eyes at the thought as she pushed Daphne's door open without knocking. She never knocked, and neither did Daph when she came bursting into the tower. Their friendship was very open in that way—close. Neither had anything to hide from the other. They chose each other as allies amongst the rivalry of the West Wing.

“Did you hear?” Daphne exclaimed as Syrenn pushed her way further into the room. Daphne leapt from her place on the window seat. She lurched for Syrenn, grabbing at her arms.

“Yes, we're all supposed to attend breakfast with the Prince.” Syrenn said, failing to hide the annoyance in her tone.

“No. Not that. About Scarlett.” It was at that moment that Syrenn finally took in Daphne's features. The girl's sage eyes were rimmed in red. She was in a panic—as if she had been crying for some time.

“What about Scarlett? Did she finally let Aster have it after last week's dinner incident?” Syrenn would be happy to hear of anyone other than herself finally standing up to the wretched girl. Aster had been under the impression since the moment they arrived that she would be queen. She was not nice towards the other girls about it either and often played nasty tricks on them, all in an effort to make them look like fools in front of the Prince. Just last week she had swapped Scarlett's stew out with one containing mushrooms. Poor Scarlett was unwise of this, and being allergic to mushrooms... Well, she was unable to finish dinner with the Prince that evening.

Luckily, her allergy wasn't life-threatening, or else Aster could have killed her.

“No, Syrenn.” Daph looked as if she would be sick. Her eyes welled up once more as she said, “They found her this morning. She's dead.”