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MARALYTH

I crushed the dried sage between my fingertips and added it to the bubbling stew, breathing deeply of my favorite herb. Everything green and growing sang music to my soul. Music I knew, by now, nobody else could hear. It was the only thing that made long hours in the kitchen bearable. Barely.

“Is that stewed quail?” My brother Nestar sidled past me to grab the tray of plates and utensils that sat waiting on the counter behind me, his dark curls tumbling across his face as always.

“More stew than quail.” I lifted my chin toward the tray. “I can bring those.”

“I’ve got them. Plates on the table will tell the men the food isn’t far behind.”

“It’s nearly ready,” I said, the words tiresome and familiar on my lips.

“You’re fine, Mara.” Nestar flashed me an understanding look as he left, though his words held the harder edge that had been growing lately.

I gave the stew a final stir and started to spoon it into the large tureen that would empty quickly at the hands of the vineyard workers I fed every day. Graylaern Vineyards, run by my father and all the Graylaerns before him, was the most famous winery in Perin Faye. I’d grown up running up and down the rows of vines, and sun-warmed grapes had been sweet on my tongue since I’d first eaten solid food. I wished I could spend most of my time tending the vines instead of behind pots of stew.

Mother had been so graceful in the kitchen, never flustered and seldom showing signs of wear, unlike the splattered apron around my

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own waist. She'd taught me as much as my meandering mind had allowed her—how to slice carrots thin, to stretch them; how to season a soup so no one would notice how scant the meat was. The workers would smile at me when I brought napkins or knives or wooden bowls of roasted corn to the table—little Mara, her mother's shadow.

I never wanted to be her shadow, though. Her own was long and dark, and she wanted me to hide in it. "The world beyond our vineyards can swallow you before you catch your next breath," she would say. "Your life is here, where you are safe and needed."

I didn't mind feeling safe, but being "needed" in the kitchen didn't make my heart dance when I lifted my head from the pillow each morning. I knew our vineyards as well as Poppa did, and better than Nestar. More than anything, I wanted to be out there with the workers. When Poppa wasn't there, they listened to me. Asked my advice and came to me to settle their petty disputes. They didn't know I whispered to the grapes to make them ripen plump and juicy. They never saw my hands banishing rot from vines before death took hold.

Mother had warned me long ago never to speak of the dark magic that came unbidden, and especially never to entertain it.

"No good comes from dark thoughts, Mara," she'd said whenever she sensed my mind was wandering places she didn't want it to go. And then she would hand me a ball of dough to pinch into biscuits.

It had been almost two years since she had breathed her last, and I was more convinced than ever that I could never take her place. And that I didn't want to.

Broth splashed my hands as I bumped the door open with my hip, and I flinched. An appreciative murmur arose from the men seated at the long table near our house; I set the tureen on the table before turning back toward the kitchen.

"Smells like heaven, Maralyth!" Kenton, Poppa's assistant, was always quick to compliment me. His gray-whiskered face crinkled in a smile.

I smiled back. "The credit's yours, for bringing the quail." Meat and fowl were hardest to come by.

I went to fetch the roasted root vegetables and fresh-baked bread, Nestar close behind me.

“Honestly, I don’t need your help,” I said, cutting him off as he reached for the steaming vegetables.

“It’s almost half an hour past noon. I’m just trying to help.”

“Has anyone complained?” I gave up on the vegetables and grabbed the bread instead.

“Of course not. They’re grateful.”

“And impatient.”

“Hungry,” Nestar said. “They’re hungry, that’s all.”

“Well, I’m feeding them.” I hooked the butter crock with one finger and slid it onto the top loaf of bread, steadying it with my chin.

“Mara.” Nestar slid in front of me, blocking the door. “It doesn’t have to be this lavish every day. Bread and cheese fills bellies just as well.”

My insides tightened, ready to snap. “Mother never would have served that.”

“You’re not Mother.”

“Thanks for the reminder.” I nudged him out of my way and waited for him to open the door so I wouldn’t drop something.

He sighed. “Maybe start a little earlier, then?”

“When I start telling you what to do in the vineyards, you can tell me what to do in the kitchen.”

“You *do* tell me what to do in the vineyards.”

But I ignored him and presented the bread at table as though it were grand prize. Poppa appeared around the corner of the house just then; I caught his eye, but his smile lacked its usual brightness.

Not that it had been all that bright since Mother died.

“Join us, Doreck!” several of the workers called.

But Poppa raised his hand and kept walking. “In a minute! I’m looking for these two.” He motioned for Nestar and me to follow him to the front of the house.

I checked to see that I’d remembered to lay out knives for spreading the butter, then followed Nestar and Poppa. The glorious rows of grapes spread before us on either side of the pathway leading to the main road, their canopies rustling faintly in the breeze. Always my heart sang when I beheld the beauty of our vineyards; I wondered if Poppa merely wanted us to drink in their bounty the way I often caught him doing as the sun set.

But no. He drew us to his sides, his arm encircling my shoulders.

“What do you make of that?” he asked, dipping his head toward the north.

I followed his gaze along the length of the road. Two riders on white horses made their way toward our gate, decked in the azure blue of the House of Nelgareth.

My stomach dropped. Ogden Nelgareth ruled the lordland of Delthe as though he were king. He kept our roads in good condition and an army known for its fierce loyalty, but stories of his dark temper had graced the ears of many a fireside listener.

He wasn't too pleased with the crown's control of our vineyards, either. Generations ago, the king of Perin Faye had subsidized Graylaern Vineyards after the Great Blight had decimated over half the vines. It saved the vineyard—and satisfied the thirst of the nobility for Graylearn reds and whites.

But then the first Thungrave king seized the throne, and soon after, he limited wine production to ensure a high price, except for fifteen percent of the yield from every acre—wine for his own cellars. The Law of Firstfruits, it was called, and it was applied to anything produced in the fields—linen, barley, oats. By law, Lord Nelgareth was allowed to require his own ten percent, bringing our yearly offering to twenty-five percent.

A famous vintner who provided drinks for the tables of a king ought to have been well off. We were left each year with barely enough to live on.

“Do you think they're coming here?” I asked.

“Perhaps.”

Nestar made a bitter sound in the back of his throat. “What business would they have with us right now? Fermentation has another two months at least for the Clarion red, and harvest is a few weeks out as well.”

“We'll know shortly,” Poppa said. “If they turn in at the gate, I'll go meet them.”

“I'll come with you.” Nestar was Poppa's only son—my half brother—and stood to inherit the vineyards someday. At nineteen, he was already more than capable of handling the daily demands of

grape-growing and winemaking, though I often felt like I could do it better.

He didn't love the vines the way I did. The way Poppa did. His eyes didn't shine when he saw the first, hard-green grapes, tiny and new, emerge from beneath the blooms each spring. He only stood at sunset to gaze across the rows of vines because Poppa was doing the same—and he valued his place by Poppa's side perhaps better than anything. Which is why I knew he wouldn't shrink from meeting Nelgareth's men and defending Poppa any way he could.

Neither would I—in my thoughts, where sharp words took shape and humbled Nelgareth's faceless riders. In reality, I'd stay silent, Mother's "be seen and not heard" still reminding me how to behave to strangers, even though I'd much rather be seen *and* heard.

And I *would* be—soon. I had a plan that could benefit small, family vineyards in nearby Windsbreath and across Delthe, and tomorrow I'd take my first step toward implementing it. It was my greatest excitement—and biggest secret.

My hope that the men would pass us by fizzled as they turned their horses into our entry, and I sighed.

"Gracing Graylaern Vineyards after all." Poppa's pride for his winery was evident in each syllable. "For all I know, it may simply be a request to purchase any barrels I might've laid by," Poppa said.

"That would take a simple written message," Nestar said. "Not a special visit."

Poppa gave me a squeeze, then released me. "Come, Nestar. We'll treat them as guests."

"Will they want some food?" I asked.

"We'll offer wine, I think," Poppa said. "Will you go fill a flagon awhile?"

"I'd rather come with you."

Poppa nodded. Slowly, he was learning how important it was to me to be included in his work. "Of course you would. But look." He lifted his chin in the direction of the house.

I turned to see several workers hanging just behind the corner of the house, curious. Watching.

"Poppa, no." I wasn't in the mood to manage nosy workers.

“Please, Mara.”

My sigh had a hard edge. “Fine. I’ll take care of them.”

“You always do,” Poppa said.

I was glad Poppa could count on me, but I wished I didn’t have to miss whatever was about to happen. I had done more for the well-being of these vineyards than anyone knew.

My heart pattered as I hastened toward the house, determined not to let myself become unraveled by these unwanted visitors. Five of Poppa’s workers stood with their hands in their pockets, shuffling under my scrutiny but not trying to hide the fact that they’d come to see what was going on.

“You’ve eaten your stew already?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Swish, one of Poppa’s more recent hires, stepped forward. “Helps to know what’s going on.”

Indignation flared inside me. “You’ve been here for two months. Why do you think it’s your business to know what’s going on?”

“It’s not just him.” Waylen, who’d worked for Poppa since I was seven or eight, crossed his arms. “If there’s trouble for Doreck, there’s trouble for all of us.”

I frowned. “Who said anything about trouble?”

“We all know the color blue.” Swish—he hadn’t offered any other name—gestured toward the riders with his chin, his sandy hair going every which way, as usual. He couldn’t have been much older than Nestar, though he acted like he knew things beyond his years, irritating me at every turn. “Why would Nelgareth send his men unless there was a problem?”

I stepped as close to him as I dared. “My father wants you to finish your meal.” I swept the others with my gaze. “All of you.”

“We just wanted to make sure we hadn’t caused any trouble,” Waylen said.

I knew what he was referring to—several of the workers had fallen into the habit of grumbling against our king, Selmar II, whenever Poppa wasn’t nearby. “If you’re worried about causing trouble, stop planning a revolt we all know none of you would actually fight for.”

“They’re just words,” Rake, another of the younger workers, said.

“Words that could land you in prison.” I gestured with both hands

toward the back of the house. “Go on. Finish your meal—there’s desert today.”

They turned, listening to me as they always did, despite the way my heart pounded in my throat. All but Swish.

Poppa’s quiet voice and sounds of horses drew nearer. Torn between ignoring Swish and insisting that he return to his meal, I stood rooted like a tree, watching Nelgareth’s men approach and trying to read the expression on Poppa’s face.

The two men dismounted, and Poppa said something about Nestar attending the horses.

Swish stepped forward. “I’ll tether them, Doreck, sir. I’ve had enough to eat.”

I wrinkled my nose and didn’t care if he’d seen me. Always he attempted to be helpful, but I didn’t like the way he skulked about.

“That’s very kind, Swish,” Poppa said.

I caught Poppa’s eye as Swish took the reins from Nestar. He cleared his throat the way he always did when he was uncomfortable.

“This is my daughter,” he said. “Maralyth, this is Jamery Devon, Lord Nelgareth’s Secretary of Accounts. And this is Jamery’s personal secretary.”

I made myself look directly at Jamery Devon, taking in his broad shoulders, hooked nose, and haughty expression. Then, legs trembling beneath my dress, I offered a small curtsy.

His only acknowledgement of my presence was a barely perceptible nod.

Cheeks burning, I cut a wide circle around Swish and made my way to the table where the rest of the workers were still gathered, grabbing an empty pitcher before slipping through the back door to the kitchen. Poppa called for Kenton, who rose as I hastened back inside to prepare the wine.

I’d just finished filling the stoneware flagon when the front door opened and the clatter of boots filled the house. Quickly, I placed two goblets and the flagon on a wooden tray. I walked light-footed into the sitting room, its stone hearth dark in the heat of summer and Mother’s seat beside it still draped with the knit lap blanket she always used in wintertime. Somehow, none of us wanted to be the one

to finally fold it away into the small trunk that held several other of her belongings.

Poppa, Kenton, and the two men stood assembled by the doorway in an awkward formation for a few seconds before Poppa gestured for everyone to sit. He raised his eyebrows at me.

“Ah, thank you, Mara. Will you set it down over here?”

I nodded, my gaze lingering for a breath or two on Poppa’s eyes, which were tender and spoke to me of his desire to draw me in, where he knew I wanted to be.

The only good thing that had come of Mother’s death, he’d said recently, was that he saw me more clearly, freed from the veil of protection Mother had always draped over me. He couldn’t give me what I really wanted, though. Nestar would take over Graylaern Vineyards someday, not me. And even if there were no Nestar, I could never do more than fix the meals and tend the house—and possibly continue to boss the workers.

Because I was a girl.

“I’ll come right to the point,” Jamery said.

“May I offer you some wine?” Poppa asked as he poured.

His secretary glanced at the wine as though he very much wanted some. Jamery offered a tight-lipped smile. “Very well, then. Thank you.”

He made his way toward the couch and the others followed. I stepped back, intending to stay as long as Poppa allowed me.

Jamery reached for a goblet. “Lord Nelgareth has expressed concern that your Firstfruits have fallen short over the past six months. I offered to come in person to sort out any miscommunication.”

My bones went rigid. There was no way Poppa had made a mistake.

Determined to show his always-present hospitality, Poppa smiled at Jamery’s secretary and gestured to the remaining goblet. “Please—have some wine. I’ll be happy to listen to your concerns.” He turned his attention to me. “Will you bring some goblets for Kenton and me, please?”

I nodded—too curtly, probably—and glanced once more at the men. Jamery rolled his cup between his hands, his mouth twisted like

a thirsty leaf. I shuddered and returned to the kitchen to fetch more goblets, fighting a sudden urge to stay there, hidden among the pots and pans and cooking mess. Invisible, the way Mother had kept me. Safe.

But I didn't want to be invisible. So I grabbed two goblets and turned to face the sitting room. Safety be damned.