

LYRA

“My father falters often because the crown cannot. Its iron grip never loosens—stronger than blood, stronger than love.”



MY TREMBLING FINGERS TIGHTENED around the door handle. The white gauzy dress Maella had thrown me into floated around my legs, the empire waist cinched with a braided gold cord. Sleeveless and simple, it was meant to make me look soft, approachable. I hoped it would make the lords see me as something other than a decoration.

I drew a steadying breath and turned the handle. The door groaned open. Sunlight poured through the high, narrow windows of the council chamber, spilling over faded maps clinging to the pale stone walls, their corners pinned by gold-tipped markers. A massive white marble table dominated the room; its surface carved with the blazing sun sigil of our house.

Twelve pairs of disapproving eyes rose to meet me. The lords of the Solar Council sat around the table—some rigid and self-important in their gold-trimmed robes, others lounging with the faint, patronizing smiles men usually reserve for unruly children.

“We appreciate your *timely* arrival,” My father, King Aurum, chided.

He sat at the head of the table, posture rigid, weathered hands folded neatly. His once-golden hair and beard had faded to winter white, and his

eyes, sapphire blue like mine, had long since clouded with a steely gray that softened for no one.

Amber robes draped his broad frame; their folds edged in gold embroidery that caught the sunlight in fleeting glints. The fabric looked thick, suffocating; how he wasn't sweating beneath it in this heat, I would never understand.

I curtsied low, composing myself behind the familiar veil of formality. Moisture prickled across my skin. Years had passed since his approval meant anything, yet under that unblinking stare, I braced for his judgment all the same.

Stupid thundercloud.

Mornings were for harp, etiquette, and embroidery lessons, all designed to smooth me into something lovely and compliant. I preferred my afternoons, when I danced until my feet ached, laughed with Thatcher over dinner, and lost myself in the markets of Sundara. On evenings when the palace grew too stifling, I'd slip away into the endless shimmer of the Sun Sea, or into the arms of a guard naïve enough to believe I could be tamed, losing myself in a darkened corridor for a moment's stolen pleasure.

I cursed my needlework tutor for the tenth time this morning. She detained me over a single crooked stitch—as if my entire worth hinged on the perfection of a thundercloud—and refused to let me leave until I fixed it. I'd joked that maybe a Stormlander lord would appreciate it, since no one here would... but we didn't associate with them. Not anymore.

Murmuring an apology for my tardiness, I crossed to the empty seat beside my older brother. I'd traded my sandals for low heels; they clicked with each step, a steady rhythm urging me to lift my chin, to appear every inch the princess they doubted. Short, slight, all sharp angles and restless energy, I looked more like a street girl who'd wandered in by accident than the Sun King's daughter.

“Perhaps she was finishing her stitching,” a councilor muttered. Laughter rippled through the chamber.

“My skill with a needle should prove useful if any of you happen to cut yourselves open on a map pin. I’ll know precisely how to sew you shut,” I said, smoothing my skirts as I lowered myself into the chair.

My father’s glare speared across the table, a silent command to behave. I met it with a sugar-sweet smile and lifted my chin, refusing to back down.

As the first woman ever allowed to sit on the Solar Council, I’d expected this kind of condescension. Sunfields women were expected to be quiet and obedient for their husbands and the men of the court—roles I’d never had the slightest interest in playing. I’d sooner jab an embroidery needle into my own eye than marry some pompous lord of the Sun Court.

The thought of sitting through endless dinners, smiling prettily while pretending to care about the petty anxieties of power-hungry men, made my skin crawl. My only supposed purpose was to decorate a man’s arm, but I wished for more than silk and small talk. I wanted to speak without being spoken to, to move without being watched, to choose something, *anything*, for myself.

Father had finally granted my request to sit on the council. Now it was my turn to prove I belonged here, and to start nudging this kingdom toward the change it so desperately needed.

Thatcher nudged my arm, emerald eyes glinting with mischief—the same clear, bright green our mother once had. Tall and lean, he wore the golden cuirass etched with sunburst motifs worn by Emberhall’s guards, fitted over a sleeveless white tunic that left his arms bare to the heat. A white cloak hung from his shoulders, the hem stirring in the breeze drifting through the windows.

Without the ceremonial helmet, his usually slicked-back blond hair fell loose across his brow, softening his features and making him look

younger than his twenty-five years. I was twenty-three, close enough in age that we'd grown up elbow-to-elbow, thick as thieves. Most of the other court children had been insufferable or, more often, warned by their noble parents to keep their distance. They'd never truly seen us as royals. Not really.

Careful, he mouthed.

I bumped his arm. *I know, I know.*

I was permitted to sit here because of him. Thatcher had spent years trying to convince our father to let me on the council, hoping to share some of his responsibilities with me. I had no intention of wasting it. I refused to give this council a sliver of reason to question his judgment. They were hard enough on him as it was, scrutinizing every breath he took simply because he was the heir.

"Let us continue," Father insisted.

The council droned on, praising the harvest, lamenting supply issues in the southern markets, and justifying the rising cost of grain. Each man spoke as if the kingdom's burdens rested solely on his shoulders. I leaned toward Thatcher and whispered, "Is this a contest to see who can worry the loudest?"

"You catch on quick," he murmured, winking.

Tuning out the sour old lords and their ceaseless muttering, I studied my nails instead. Nothing about my usual appearance ever suggested a polished princess. My hair was almost always wild from racing through the Sun Sea; my skirts perpetually dusted with dirt from kneeling in the fields to pluck flowers straight from the earth. But my nails—those I kept immaculate. Perfectly manicured, shaped to fine, sharp points. I guarded them fiercely, careful never to let them chip or break.

It was, admittedly, the only truly princess-like thing about me.

During a *riveting* monologue about the breeding and trading of meadowhorns, a dull throb bloomed behind my eyes. I'd pinned my long golden hair into a tight, pristine bun, hoping the council might take me more seriously if I at least looked the part. I hated wearing it up; it always left me feeling like my skull was being squeezed in a vice.

I rubbed my temples, trying to ease the pressure gathering there, when Lord Brennet, our defense minister, rose to speak. Wiry and weathered, he stood stiff as a spear. His starched white uniform was edged in gold piping, every brass button polished to a shine. Even his black leather boots gleamed, freshly scrubbed to perfection.

"Forgive me for interrupting this enthralling debate," he said, voice sharp. "However, reported movements along the eastern border demand immediate discussion."

His icy stare cut to me, lingering long enough to prickle sweat at the base of my neck before shifting to the King.

"Let me guess," Thatcher sighed. "Stormland thieves again?"

"Afraid not, Your Highness. Patrol teams reported members of the Storm Guard along the eastern ridge."

"That's not unusual. They patrol the border as we do."

"Not in groups this large, and not this frequently. The border is far from their capital—too far to justify patrols at that scale."

"Isn't Howler's Crossing considered neutral ground?" I asked. Heat crawled up my ears the moment the words left me.

My ignorance was obvious. Maps, strategy, politics—those lessons belonged to princes, not princesses. Everything I knew came from scraps: overheard debates, market gossip, the boasts of mercenaries who floated through the city crowds and thought themselves impressive.

"Neutral for now," one councilor muttered.

“The bridge can barely hold a handful of men at once,” another councilor said dismissively. “There’s no other crossing. I see no cause for concern.”

All the bridges that had once linked our kingdoms had been destroyed after the border closure. Only the span at Howler’s Crossing remained—rebuilt by the Stormlanders, if the stories were true, to slip into our lands under cover of night and pillage what they pleased.

I shifted in my seat, the gauzy fabric of my dress whispering against the polished wood. “Could this simply be posturing?”

Chairs creaked. Heads turned toward me. Some faces tightened with surprise; others softened with a kind of wary curiosity. A few looked at me as though a child had spoken out of turn.

“Stormlanders don’t posture, Your Highness,” Brennet said. “Everything they do serves a purpose.”

“Then what purpose does this serve?”

“Perhaps His Majesty could elaborate.”

My father’s shoulders tightened. The muscle in his jaw ticked. He had remained still as stone, choosing to stay silent throughout the meeting. Thatcher had taken the lead instead, and I couldn’t help but wonder if this was his way of preparing him for the throne.

“They’re people are starving,” Thatcher said quietly, “and our harvests have finally returned.”

Rain in the Sunfields had thinned year after year until, two years ago, the drought left our fields dry and famine cast its long shadow over every village in the kingdom. I still remembered the hollow-cheeked children in the markets, the empty granaries, the way fear had settled over the city.

My brother had spent weeks poring over brittle maps and forgotten plans, chasing a single idea: carve irrigation channels from the Solmere River in the north down toward the southwestern farmlands. Crops

returned. Markets swelled. For the first time in years, we no longer lived with hunger hanging over our heads.

“If they are testing the border, this will only be the beginning,” Brennet pressed.

“Are you saying they intend to invade?” someone asked.

“It’s possible,” he replied. A few councilors shifted uneasily.

Lord Wesley, our finance minister—portly, self-important, and always stroking the signet ring on his finger—offered a limp solution. “We could send a cart of grain. Perhaps it’ll buy us a bit of goodwill.”

“Carts of grain will be sent,” my father said at last, his voice tight. “As will something else.” Every councilor snapped their gaze toward him, hungry for answers. Father drew a slow breath, the muscles in his jaw working, before finally grinding out, “King Varyon and I have been in private discussion.”

The room erupted into chaos. A dozen voices surged at once—shouting, arguing, demanding answers—why had they been left blind? How dare he negotiate without their counsel?

I turned to Thatcher. He only shrugged, though the crease forming between his brows betrayed his confusion. Then my focus shifted to Brennet. He looked... weary. And relieved. As if he’d been waiting for my father’s secret dealings with the Storm King to finally be dragged to light, whether the rest of us were ready for it or not.

My father raised a single hand, and the uproar died at once. “I’ve struck an alliance,” he said. “Not sealed with coin or crops, but with something far more binding—something to shield us from the threat of war.”

A councilor leaned forward, his voice accusatory. “Then why are the Storm Guard patrolling in such high numbers along our border if peace has already been secured?”

“Because they’ve come to collect on what was promised.”

The councilors stared at their King expectantly, everyone except Brennet. His gaze lingered on me instead, steady and pointed, as if he were sending a warning.

Then the truth struck me.

I understood why I had been late that morning, why my tutor had fixated on a single crooked stitch, why the thundercloud I embroidered had felt so wrong. She only ever had me stitch roses or daisies, things that thrived in the sun.

A knot formed in my throat. My fingers drifted to my forearm. In my haste, I'd forgotten my gold cuffs. My wrist met my nails, and I dug into the soft flesh, grounding myself against a truth I suddenly feared I already knew.

"What have they come to collect, Father?" The chamber hushed around me. "Say it," I demanded, the knot in my throat tightening as every pair of eyes swung toward me.

Thatcher's hand closed over mine, anchoring me before I tipped fully into panic. Only then did the sting at my wrist register. I'd clawed so hard at my own skin that tiny beads of blood welled in perfect half-moon crescents.

"I need to hear you say it, Father," I said again. "Not from Lord Brennet. From *you*."

The chamber walls closed in. My pulse hammered in my ears. I was the first woman to sit at this table.

I had plans.

I had hopes.

I had *dreams*.

One sentence unmade them all.

"You will marry the Storm Prince."