

JALA'S MASK

 MIKE AND RACHEL GRINTI 

JALA'S MASK



an imprint of **Prometheus Books**
Amherst, NY

Published 2014 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

Jala's Mask. Copyright © 2014 by Mike and Rachel Grinti. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, digital, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, or conveyed via the Internet or a website without prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Cover image © Marc Simonetti

Cover design by Jacqueline Nasso Cooke

Inquiries should be addressed to

Pyr

59 John Glenn Drive

Amherst, New York 14228

VOICE: 716-691-0133

FAX: 716-691-0137

WWW.PYRSE.COM

18 17 16 15 14 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Grinti, Mike, author.

Jala's mask / by Mike and Rachel Grinti.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-61614-978-9 (paperback) — ISBN 978-1-61614-979-6 (ebook)

1. Fantasy fiction. I. Grinti, Rachel, author. II. Title.

PS3607.R5684J35 2014

813'.6—dc23

2014023873

Printed in the United States of America

*For Jenn K.
Slasb away!*

CHAPTER 1

The king's grayships spread out down the length of the coastline, their red-streaked sails visible between the palm trees. Jala watched their approach from the roof of her family's manor. It was a calm day, and the sails hung slack.

Nearby, Jala's father swore. "How are we supposed to feed them all? We'll be eating palm leaves and grass by the time they're gone."

"But there'll be dancing," Jala said. She'd been practicing for months now. What would it be like to dance with the king? With any man, for that matter. She'd only been allowed to dance with other girls until now. It wasn't fair, really. Jala's cousins danced with anyone they liked, and no one thought twice about girls and boys from the village dancing together.

"You don't need a feast for dancing. Just a drummer," her father muttered. "I'll tell your mother you're getting ready." He started down the steps but paused for a moment to say, "I'll miss you. You know that. But I'll be proud, too. Prouder than I've ever been. You know what this could mean for our family?"

Jala smiled at him. "I know." She'd heard this same speech a hundred times, but her father was never one to let her forget how much pressure she was under.

The king's ship landed. Six men disembarked and formed a line on the beach. The king came ashore next. He wore fine silks taken from the Autumn Lands, gold-spun wool from Renata, and necklaces inlaid with stones that glittered red and blue in the sun.

My future husband, Jala thought. *Maybe.*

Only the earring in his left ear didn't shine. It was half the heart of a shipwood reef, white and gnarled. The King's Earring. Its other half would be worn by the queen.

Jala heard someone coming up the stairs and turned to see Marjani, her closest friend. "You missed the fleet coming in."

Marjani shrugged, peering over the edge. "Well, he's not short, or

8 JALA'S MASK

scrawny. But that earring looks heavy, doesn't it? I wonder if it'll stretch out your ear."

"If it does, I'll just wear one on the other ear that weighs the same."

Marjani stepped closer and hugged her. "You're scared, aren't you?"

Jala nodded. "Maybe I wasn't until everyone started asking me." She rested her head on Marjani's shoulder and took several slow breaths to calm herself. "You know this is his last stop? He's had girls like me thrown at him for weeks."

"It's all right if he doesn't pick you."

"You know it's not," Jala said.

"Well, it's all right to me. I'd rather you stayed anyway," Marjani said. "Since you're set on it, I made this for you." She held out a comb made from carved and polished palm wood.

Jala ran her fingers over it, then slid it into the rows of thin braids gathered at the crown of her head. Marjani straightened it for her and smiled.

They'd been friends since they were five years old. Twelve years of seeing each other nearly every day. *And if everything goes right, I might not see her again for months.*

"You can visit me," Jala said. "As often as you want, and I'll send you messenger birds every day."

"Hah! Like you'll have time for that. You'll probably forget all about me."

"You're right, I will," Jala said. "I'm forgetting already. Everything's fading . . . it's like the last ten years of my life never existed." She squinted at Marjani and imitated her grandmother's quavery voice. "Excuse me, little girl, have we met?"

"Very convincing," Marjani said. "I wish I could hide up here until it's over. It's not that I want you to face it alone, of course. But I don't want to marry the king, so I don't know why I have to pretend I'm interested."

"My mother's a bully, that's why." Jala was only half joking this time. She didn't think her mother had relaxed for more than a few moments since they heard the king would be visiting. And if Zuri couldn't relax, no one could.

“She told me not to worry so much and that he won’t want me anyway. I *think* she meant it in a nice way.”

“That sounds like something she’d say. She probably did think she was helping.” They watched the king approach the manor, escorted by his guards. The white sand of the beach was blinding, but when Jala peered over the edge, she could just see him pass through the main gate. “Come on, looks like it’s time. We’ll never hear the end of it if we’re late.”

Marjani nodded and allowed Jala to pull her away from the edge of the roof to the steep staircase leading down to the halls below. The king was probably already being greeted by Jala’s parents. Then they would present the older members of the family. Finally, they would introduce him to the eligible daughters in the Bardo family. Jala would be introduced last.

Jala heard a drum reverberating through the brick walls. A slow beat, at least ten heartbeats apart, played on a lighter drum. That meant it was an occasion for moving slowly, for considering, but not a solemn day. She let the steady rhythm calm her.

“Stand up straight,” Jala whispered to herself. “Don’t play with your hair. Look him in the eyes when he addresses you and smile, but don’t stare or you’ll scare him off.” They took another set of steps down, turned left into a smaller hall, and stopped outside a door with two of Jala’s cousins.

From beyond the doorway Jala heard a man’s deep voice declare, “Presenting Azi, of the Kayet family, king of the Five-and-One Islands. Where are the heads of this island and its family?”

Jala’s father said, “I am Mosi of the Bardo. Welcome, my king. The ships of the Second Isle greet you with raised oars and lowered sails.”

“I am Zuri of the Bardo,” said Jala’s mother. “Welcome, my king. Our family greets you as a guest, with slow drums and swords unsharpened.”

“I accept your hospitality, and I wish your fleet good hunting,” a new voice said. Jala leaned closer to the door to listen. *It must be the king.*

Then Jala’s aunts and uncles introduced themselves, followed by the members of the Kayet family that had come with the king on his bride hunt. Traditionally they came to support the king, but in reality they

10 JALA'S MASK

would spend most of their time telling him who they thought he should marry.

Remember, Jala's mother had said, *the king will love you for your looks and charm. But his family will approve of you because you will seem quiet and easy to control.* Her mother had gone on about everything Jala would do for her family once she was queen, but Jala hadn't really listened. Her father had been teaching her how to be queen for two years now. She knew everything they had to say.

Jala ran her hands down the folds of her dress, smoothing it in case her skirts had ballooned out on her way back. The skin of a rainbow serpent around her shoulder added whirls of color. Her braids spiraled in elaborate patterns and just brushed her shoulders.

"Here," one of her cousins said, handing Jala a vial of palm oil. Jala pulled out the stopper, poured a little into her hands, then rubbed it into her cheeks and forehead and down her arms. She passed the vial to Marjani and pushed the bracelets on Marjani's thin wrists farther up her arms so they wouldn't jangle.

The drum stopped. Jala's heart stopped for a second. The traditional part of the meeting was over. It was time.

"My king, would you like to meet the daughters of the Bardo?"

"I would, Lord Mosi." Something about the way he said it made Jala think that what he really meant was *Let's get this over with.*

"My king." It was her mother's voice. "Please let me introduce my sister's daughter, Nia."

Nia arched her back slightly, opened the door, and walked out slowly. "I am most pleased and privileged to meet you, my king."

"She's a fine girl," Jala's mother said, "with a good head to help you lead the islands and good hips to bear both our families' children."

"How old is she?" asked the man who'd introduced the king. There was some haggling between the two families, with Jala's mother making a case for her niece and the king's family criticizing. Soon the other girl was called, and Marjani after that.

"Why does this one look so sullen?" Jala heard the same man say. "Is this the best that the blood of the Bardo can present to the king of the Five-and-One Islands?"

“Surely there is more to a queen than looks,” Jala’s mother said, but there was an edge to her voice, and Jala hoped Marjani wouldn’t get lectured later. She scowled to hear them talking about Marjani like that, even if exaggerated criticism was expected. Jala’s mother made her case for Marjani for another minute, then moved on. “But if she is not to the king’s liking, then may I present my own daughter, Jala.”

Jala took a breath and then walked out into the manor’s greeting hall. Her aunts and uncles stood along both sides of the wall on one end of the hall, the king’s guards on the other. Her parents waited with the king at the center. All eyes were on Jala. Her palms were sweaty. She hoped he wouldn’t notice if he took her hand.

Soon she was by her mother’s side, standing in front of the king. He looked different than she had expected. Beneath the layers of finery was a boy only a year older than herself. A wicked scar cut across his shaved head, stopping just above his left eye. It was a raised, ugly, pinkish thing that stood out from his black skin. Yet the effect it had on him wasn’t ugliness. Instead, it made him look dangerous, fierce. He stood still and silent, almost rigid, as he watched her approach. Jala tried to keep her breathing even.

This was not quite the king she had imagined. Jala had met his brother, Jin, the boy who had been in line for the throne. Jin had smiled easily and liked to flirt. He put everyone at ease. But Jin had died, and this younger brother had taken his place.

“My king,” Jala said. She realized she was staring and bowed her head.

“Hello,” the king said. He said nothing for a moment, still watching her.

Jala’s cheeks warmed under his gaze. She felt stupid staring at his feet, but she was suddenly nervous about meeting those dark eyes again. Nothing ventured . . .

She let her eyes wander over his lean arms, then higher. Her gaze lingered on his lips, and she was suddenly thinking about how soft they looked.

Her mother was talking again, but Jala wasn’t listening. She needed to say something, to break through this monotonous ceremony. Something clever or funny, maybe? But her mind was busy wondering what it would be like to kiss the king. How could she be speechless? She and

12 JALA'S MASK

Marjani had spent the last week thinking of little else. She knew they'd come up with a thousand things for Jala to say when she met him.

Jala met his eyes and saw he was already distracted, his gaze darting to the man standing beside him, the one who'd insulted Marjani. Thinking of Marjani's reluctance, she realized just how many times he must have seen this exact scene played before him. If she was nervous, might he be nervous, too? Or was he just bored? One thing was clear, his mind was already moving on, probably wondering what her family was serving for dessert.

"We're having spice cake," she said.

The king blinked and looked back at her, as though he was seeing her for the first time. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"I said we're having spice cake for dessert tonight. You looked like you'd rather be eating right now, and honestly so would I. I thought I'd let you know, in case you don't like spice cake."

"Jala!" her mother said. But she didn't seem to know what to do. She couldn't yell in front of the king and his family, not without making Jala's rudeness worse. Jala wasn't sure if she was being rude or flirting. Possibly a little of both. But she had his attention now.

"I do, in fact, like spice cake," he said, and there was a hint of a smile on his face now. "So, Jala. What are your feelings on spice cake? Or if that's too personal, your thoughts on dessert in general."

It was completely ridiculous to be talking about cake right now, but of course it wasn't about cake. It was about saying anything to keep the moment from ending. She wanted to talk to him again, even as part of her wanted to run and hide. This wasn't at all the way her mother said she was supposed to behave, but it didn't matter. She was talking to the king, and she wanted him to keep looking at her the way he was now. That look that was halfway between amused and arrested. Neither of them looked away.

"I like cake well enough," she said. "But I like dancing more. Well, actually it depends on the cake . . . and on the dancing partner. There's a dance tonight, of course, and we have the best drummers you've ever heard. If you think you can keep up, you should ask me to dance."

The king smiled widely now. "I think I will."



The king was led away to his quarters, with his family trailing behind. Then the Bardo family's calm order dissolved, and everyone rushed to prepare for the dance. Jala stood in the center of it all, taking in sweet, slow breaths. In the middle of the floor, several large circles were being drawn. A little girl laughed as she helped to throw chalk onto the floor. It hung in the air and made Jala cough.

The commotion was like the distant wind, the chatter and cries of her family like the surf. She heard it one moment and forgot about it the next. Yes, it was true, the king always chose one daughter from each island to dance with. But he wanted to dance with her. She had seen it in his smile, in his voice, in those brown eyes that had watched her so intently.

"Come on." Marjani pulled her out of the hall and up to their rooms. "We have to get you into something you can dance in. I can't believe you did that. What did your mother say?"

"She hasn't said anything yet. I'm sure it's going to depend on whether I fall on my face during the dance."

Marjani helped Jala into a simpler dress, a strip of silk pulled low around her chest and a skirt decorated with bright flowers from the Bluesun Peninsula. She slipped a hoop of gold through Jala's left ear; the other Jala kept free.

Jala's mother arrived, looked her over, and nodded her approval. She leaned in close to Jala's ear. "Your little game has worked for now, but don't be a fool and think you've won. He clearly finds you charming, but the uncle, Lord Inas, is not happy the boy asked you to dance. He'll be watching you closely. If the king asks you to walk alone with him, be sure to hesitate before accepting. If he kisses you, you must push him away, but not too hard. Otherwise he'll think you don't find him attractive. You must leave him wanting more."

"I know. I practiced with Marjani." Jala wasn't sure she wanted to do any such thing. She didn't like the thought of being that way herself. And why should she hide what she thought or what she wanted? He might be a

king, but Jala wanted to be a queen. It was a good thing her mother couldn't watch her too closely tonight. There were other guests to look after.

Her mother whisked her out of the room and back to the main hall, with Marjani trailing after. Jala could hear the murmur of the guests waiting for the dance to begin. A few stray beats reverberated through the brick walls as the drummers warmed up.

She sat down at the head table, while her parents and Marjani took their places on the other side of the table. King Azi was seated next to Jala, and his sleeve brushed against her arm as he sat. Like her father, the king was now dressed in a simple robe that hung loosely over his body. He wore golden rings around his wrists and ankles.

From across the table, Marjani batted her eyes at Jala and puckered her lips like a fish. Jala choked on a laugh and kicked her friend under the table. At least, she *hoped* that was Marjani's leg. She faced the king, but she still saw Marjani making faces from the corner of her eye. Deep breaths. Giggling uncontrollably was not going to make a good impression. Marjani was going to pay for this later.

"Will you be competing in the wind-dance, my king?" Jala asked.

The king nodded, his smile widening. "I've heard your father is a tough man to beat. I'm looking forward to it. Though to be honest, it may not be much of a show. I haven't had a chance to wind-dance since Jin . . . since I was called off ship."

Jala winced. *Nice work. I'm sure you're the first girl that tried to charm him by reminding him of his dead brother.*

The king looked over at Jala's father. "I hope you won't embarrass me too much, Lord Mosi."

Jala's father grinned. "There's nothing embarrassing about losing to a master."

Servants set pitchers of palm wine on the tables, along with more exotic drinks: grape wine in two colors, beer made from barley and ginger, and liquor made from peppers that one of the ships had stumbled onto in the Autumn Lands.

"Be careful with it, my lord," Jala's father told the king's uncle, Lord Inas, pointing at the green-hued pepper liquor. "It's like drinking the fire mountain's piss. It burns your throat, then your belly, then your brain.

You feel like a god and walk like a fish.” He stood. “Bardo and Kayet, welcome. Today we celebrate the rise of a new king and, I hope, the rise of our two families as one. By the king’s will, together our two families will lead the Five-and-One ahead to days of even greater splendor. And now, my friends, let’s eat and dance!”

It was just like her father to start with something so presumptuous. The Bardo cheered and began to eat, but she saw Lord Inas scowl. The king offered Jala half of an orange, and she took it, glad to have something to keep her hands busy. Just the smell of the pepper liquor made Jala’s eyes water, so she stuck to white wine.

The center of the floor had been cleared for dancing once everyone had eaten, but for now a storyteller took to the center. She bowed first to the king, then to Jala’s parents. But when she spoke, she smiled broadly and turned in place, including all the guests. “What story shall we hear? The wedding of Ipo of the Bardo and the hurricane Inok that would have washed away all the islands if not for their love?”

“Ipo was Kayet, not Bardo,” one of the Kayet guests called out good-naturedly.

“Then everyone has heard the story wrong,” the storyteller said with a slight bow. “But if that doesn’t please you, what about the meeting of Baya and Kai, who would later sail across the Great Ocean in the first grayship? Perhaps I could tell of one of the Three Nights of King Badru and the sailor Jamil?”

This last caused a few laughs and giggles. The Three Nights were bittersweet and erotic, and would have been more appropriate at a wedding or repeated between friends or lovers. She’d heard two of three nights told by her older cousins, and had thought about them more than once lying awake at night. She snuck a glance at the king and was glad there was no way for him to see how hot her face felt. Maybe the wine wasn’t a good idea. Maybe sitting so close to him wasn’t a good idea. That story was definitely not a good idea.

People shouted out their favorite from the options the teller had given, and others she hadn’t mentioned. But Lord Inas’s voice silenced them. “Tell us of the Lone Isle and the Fire Mountain, and the family whose name no teller can tell.”

16 JALA'S MASK

Heads turned, and more than one whisper could be heard over the drum. The stories of the Three Nights might be a little risqué, but after all, the king was supposed to be picking a wife, so it was only a little presumptuous. The story Lord Inas had asked for was old and dark and bloody, and had no place at a feast like this.

But the teller showed no surprise or hesitation. Lord Inas and the Kayet were guests, and the choice was theirs if they insisted on it. "Very well, my lord," she said, and began to speak of a time before the families had united the Five-and-One Islands under a king and queen. A time when there were six families instead of five, and they warred amongst themselves.

"The fire mountain was known then as the Green Mountain, for it was lush with trees, and on these trees grew every fruit from every land in all the world. Every fruit but the fruit of life that makes a man immortal, for that can no longer be found in the living world.

"Though no reef grew around the Lone Isle even then, and the Sixth Family had no ships with which to raid the mainland or make war on the other families, they were left alone in peace. Because there was one more fruit that grew on the mountain: the fruit of secrets, a fruit sweet as wine and bitter as roots, and when they ate from it they heard the whispers of fire and wind and water and learned the ways of sorcery and magic. They called down storms and raised great waves. They saw far-off places and heard the songs of whales beneath the Great Ocean. It's even said they gave the birds of the Five-and-One the tongues of men and women so they could repeat our words.

"But while all the other fruit sated their hunger, the fruit of secrets only made them hunger for more. One by one they cut down the trees of the Green Mountain to plant more secret trees, until the mountain became angry. Smoke rose from the top, fire spilled down over the mountain like water, and the secret trees, and the Sixth Family, burned."

"Not the usual choice for a feast, as far as tales go," Jala's father said casually. "But I did always enjoy this story."

"Really?" Lord Inas said. "And do you enjoy the lessons it teaches us?"

He was threatening her father, Jala realized. Or warning him, at least. But her father seemed unconcerned.

“That power leads to foolishness? That one too many schemes can undo even the most feared family?” He smiled his most friendly smile. “I think that’s always been my favorite part.”

The king rubbed at his temple. “Well told,” he called out. “A reminder to all of us that too many whispers and secrets aren’t healthy. But let’s have something less serious next. Tell us of Baya and Kai. It’s been a while since I’ve heard that story.”

The storyteller did as the king asked, though the king hardly seemed to pay attention, instead staring down at his own plate in disinterest. Jala ate everything on her plate but tasted little of it, and she spent most of her time sneaking glances at the king. Her father, meanwhile, drank some of every wine and tasted some of every dish. Jala’s mother savored her favorites. Lord Inas nursed his liquor.

Finally most of the guests seemed to have had enough of food and stories, and the drums took on a faster beat. People began to bang on tables, clap their hands, slap their legs. The storyteller sat to eat her own meal. The dance floor was open.

Jala’s father stood and said, “Well, King Azi, I would be honored to have the first dance.”

“The honor is mine, Lord Mosi.”

They went to the circle in the center of the floor. Both of them took off their robes, handing them to family members assigned to the task. It left both of them naked except for a tightly wrapped loincloth.

“If you’re going to stare,” her mother said under her breath, “at least try to be subtle about it.”

Jala quickly looked down, embarrassed. But she couldn’t help glancing at them again a moment later. They had stepped into the ring, and Jala’s father was signaling the drummers. A low beat started to play. Outside, more drums took up the beat. Around the hall people clapped their hands and banged on tables. Jala felt lifted by the sound, as though her blood flowed quicker to match.

“Dance well, my lords,” one of the drummers shouted.

“Like the wind,” Jala’s father called back.

The king and her father danced. They started with the basic form of the dance, circling one another, switching places as they lunged, kicked,

twisted. Then their moves became fancier: handstand-kicks and throws that became graceful cartwheels. Their golden rings flashed in the firelight. The dance was violent and energetic, full of implied brutality coupled with stunning grace. Any one of the blows could have brought them to their knees, yet none ever quite connected. Always the kick was caught, the force redirected to keep the wind-dance moving through its circular path. Sweat glistened on the king's skin, and Jala found herself staring. What would it be like to touch the wiry muscles of his arms and chest?

It was clear that Jala's father had taken the lead and would not give it up. The king had to work just to keep up. The drummers egged the dancers on, playfully mocking and complimenting in turn. Other men entered the dance rings together, blocking Jala's view of her father and the king. The hall seemed to swim with the movements of the wind-dance.

"He's gonna knock that boy flat on his back, and then where will we be?" Jala's mother muttered into Jala's ear, "For all his whining about the cost, you'd think he'd be a little more careful." She turned and smiled at the king's uncle. "Your nephew dances very well."

Lord Inas snorted. "He was always the better dancer." Inas was a stocky, balding man with a crown of dark hair and a full moustache, both going gray. His forehead was lined with wrinkles as he scowled at Jala. "Did you know Jin? I'm sure you two must have met."

Jala nodded. "We did. He was charming."

"He always was to girls like you." Inas poured himself a bowl full of the pepper liquor and drank heavily, then coughed for a long time. The drink was so strong it made his eyes turn bloodshot and water. Jala's mother deftly moved the liquor out of his reach in the guise of making space for more food and drink.

The king returned to the table with Jala's father. He drank some of the palm wine and held out his hand to Jala. "I haven't forgotten. Will you join me?"

Jala took his hand, and he pulled her between the dancers and into the circle that had been set aside for them. He took the center first, for when the king was looking for a queen the traditional order was reversed. She danced around him, following the outline of the circle, swaying and spinning, showing off her body and her grace. At least she hoped that's

what she was showing off. She tried to lose herself in the movement of the dance, to forget how nervous and excited she felt, but the thoughts kept running through her head. *I'm dancing with the king.*

The king did not dance the male part of the courtship dance. Instead, he took her hands and pulled her close. They spun in the circle together. The air was hazy with smoke and chalk. His hands were strong, his fingers rough and calloused. Her heart beat too fast and too loud, distracting her from the rhythm of the drums.

The king leaned in close and whispered, "It's too noisy, and I'm tired of dancing. Is there somewhere quiet where we can talk?" His lips brushed against the tip of her ear.

Jala didn't hesitate. "Of course."

She took his hand and led him out of the circle. They slipped out down a side hall, away from the guards who tried to follow and into the open air. Bonfires burned up and down the beach, and drummers played fast, lively music. One of the sailors was juggling knives. Another drank deeply from a cup, then held up a lit brand and spat. The ball of flame rose ten feet into the air, shaking the leaves on the palm tree overhead.

They headed away from the fires and the crowds. The wind from the ocean was cool and salty. Jala took them past crowds of dancing villagers and along the walls of the manor. They stopped near a group of trees.

"It's quiet enough here," Jala said. Her voice was shaking. The king still held her hand. Her whole body ached when he smiled at her, his teeth almost glowing in the moonlight. It was a good thing this corner was well lit.

"I'm glad it was only the four of you," the king said. "Sometimes these things take forever. They parade girls in front of me for an hour, every second or third cousin they can pull out of a village and claim some semblance of royalty. Not that they really expect me to notice them, but they think it makes the *right* girl that much more enticing to me. With you, they only brought out two cousins, and of course that girl who scowled at me to try to make you look prettier. They shouldn't have bothered. With any of it."

Jala realized he meant Marjani and felt suddenly protective. "And what's wrong with scowling at you? Not everyone wants to marry you, you know, and they don't much like being paraded either."

20 JALA'S MASK

"There's nothing wrong with her," the king said quickly. "I just meant that nobody there really expected me to look twice at her, not even you."

"Well, maybe you should have looked at her twice, then. Or three times. Or however many times before you saw how amazing she was. Wouldn't that have been a surprise for all of them?"

He laughed. "I don't usually surprise anyone. It's not really something anyone wants in a king. But if you're right and she's not interested in me, it's all worked out for the best, hasn't it?" The king shook his head. "You know . . . most girls try to talk themselves up, not defend their supposed competition. I think I've been trying to compliment you."

Jala felt her cheeks warm. "Her name's Marjani. She's my friend, not my competition. We've been friends forever."

"I'm sure most of the girls have had friends like that. None bothered mentioning them when they were alone with me, though." He walked in silence for a while, then stopped. "This isn't easy, you know. It's not fun for me, ignoring girls I'd gladly kiss because their families aren't worth considering, charming others because their families have as many ships as yours and I'm not supposed to offend them. It's driving me crazy, and what's any of it for? In the end my uncle will tell me who to pick, who he's made the best alliance with. My family doesn't even trust me to pick my bride for myself."

So, her family's plans were for nothing after all. He already knew who he'd marry, and this whole trip was just for show. But how could he be so easily swayed by his uncle? "I don't think I understand. You're the king," Jala said. "You can marry whoever you want. Your brother would have."

"I wish he could," the king said. "Then I really could do what I want and go out there." He waved at the beach and the Great Ocean beyond. "I want to sail home with ships full of silk and dyes and wine. I want to drink with my friends on the beach and visit Ko—" He stopped himself and shook his head. "If I had what I wanted, Jin would still be here. Dead sails," he cursed, leaning back against the wall and staring out over the water. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make things so sad and serious. I just thought we could talk some, and maybe I'd steal a kiss before we went inside again. It's been a long month."

"You don't want to be king?" Jala asked. She'd wanted to be queen all her life. Ever since the first time her mother had said, *You might be queen someday*, in a voice tinged with hope and fear and expectation, she had wanted it.

"I did when I was younger," the king said, "but I always knew what the cost would have to be. Anyway, younger brothers in line for the throne aren't encouraged to want it too much."

Jala wasn't sure she should press him, but she did anyway. If they parted ways after tonight, she might never be alone with a king's full attention again. "Do you miss him?"

The king shrugged. "I guess. I missed him long before he died. I was on a ship while he was off with my father, learning how to be a good king. Sometimes I think maybe I should have been the one that died. I almost did, when some merchant's wife gave me this scar for trying to take her rings. Meanwhile he scratches himself with a rusted sword, and I'm the one that lives?" He sighed. "It doesn't matter now. Things are the way they are."

None of this was going the way it was supposed to. Jala could almost hear her mother's voice: *Get him to talk about your looks. Tell him he'll make a great king*. She squeezed his hand. "I'm sorry about your brother," she said softly. "But I'm glad you didn't die."

He leaned forward, hesitated, then kissed her on the mouth. His lips tasted salty, just like the air, but they were soft and hot. Jala let herself relax into his hold. It was so easy to kiss him, somehow. She found it hard to remember that there was any reason to stop. She could feel his heart beating quickly, as fast as her own. The wind felt cold over her bare shoulders.

In just a minute, I'll tell him to stop.

"Here they are," someone shouted, and suddenly they were surrounded by voices. Azi pulled away from her. People stared at her: the guards who were supposed to keep an eye on her, her mother and her cousins, men and women from the village.

"So this was your plan?" It was the king's uncle, standing next to Jala's mother and speaking loud enough for everyone to hear. "To have your daughter seduce the king so that he felt obligated to choose her? I

22 JALA'S MASK

wonder how many others she's kissed back here. Now I see the kind of queen the Bardo offer."

The king reached for her hand, but Jala pulled away in the guise of straightening her hair. A braid had come undone, so she tied it back once more. If she could do nothing else, at least she could try to maintain some dignity.

"I have to go," Jala said.

Azi stepped between Jala and the others. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that. I'll talk to my uncle, you've done nothing wrong."

"Let me pass," Jala said, then added, "My king."

He looked like he was about to say something, but instead he stepped aside. "Of course. Go to your family, and we'll sort this out tomorrow. Good night, Jala."

"Good night, my king."

She walked through the crowd with her head high. Her mother tried to pull Jala to her side, but she ignored her. Her heart was still pounding, and her stomach was twisted up into a knot. She wasn't sure why she bothered pretending. Dignity was important for a queen, and she had no chance of that now.