

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

**I**n my letter I played on Father's pride and described the part of my servitude that would most enrage him: tending the fire in front of the courtiers.

*How dare they treat me so. And against your express wishes too! They order me about, and the more menial the task, the better.*

*I beg you to come home. Many merchants trade right here in Frell; why can't you join their number? Please come. My need is great. You know I would not ask otherwise. Come quickly. I am counting the days.*

*Your daughter,  
Ella*

I gave the letter to Mandy to post. Perhaps it would overtake Father on the road. The mail coach driver knew him. It might reach him before my earlier letter got to Char. Father could even be back in a few days.

Until I saw him or heard from him, I would endure. I stayed out of my stepfamily's way as much as possible, and the longer I worked as a scullery maid, and the filthier I got, the less Hattie and Mum Olga tormented me. I think they gloried in my squalor as proof of my baseness.

From Olive, though, there was no respite, and to escape from her, I hid. My most secure hideaway was the library. Although I never dared stay long, I was able to steal half hours reading Mum Olga's dusty tomes. No one ever thought to look for me there, or to visit for pleasure.

I don't know whether I was more anxious to hear from Father or from Char. I kept thinking about Char and wishing to talk to him. If I thought of a joke, I wanted to try it on him. If I had a serious idea, I wanted his opinion.

Although weeks passed without an answer from Father, my first letter from Char arrived only ten days after I'd sent mine to him. Then letter followed letter for the first six months of his absence, while I heard nothing from Father, and saw nothing of him either.

As I had directed, Char sent his letters to Mandy, who pretended to have an admirer. Hattie and Mum Olga were vastly amused at Mandy's romance, but I failed to see why it was any more absurd than Mum Olga and Father.

Char's hand was large and round, the letters evenly spaced, each fully formed—completely unlike my crabbed, spiky writing. His showed a balanced, honest nature, while Areida used to say mine proved me imaginative, impulsive, and always in a hurry.

*Dear Ella,*

*My name has been changed. Here they call me Echarmote, which sounds more like a sneeze than a name. They can't pronounce Char, and I can't persuade them to call me Echare. They are so formal. They say "by your leave" more often than they say anything else.*



The Ayorthaians think before they speak, and often conclude, after lengthy meditation, that nothing need be said. The loudest beings in an Ayorthaian council are the flies. The occasional bee that finds its way in is deafening.

I long for conversation. The ordinary Ayorthaians are talkative, but the nobles are not. They are kind. They smile easily. But speech for them is a single word, occasionally a phrase. Once a week they utter a complete sentence. On their birthdays they grant the world an entire paragraph.

At first I chattered to fill the silence. In response, I received smiles, bows, thoughtful expressions, shrugs, and an occasional "Perhaps, by your leave." So now I keep my speeches to myself.

In the garden this morning I overtook the duke of Andona. I touched his shoulder in greeting. He nodded companionably. In my mind I said, "The flowers are marvelous. That one grows in Kyrria, but that other I've never seen before. What do you call it?"

In my imagination he answered me, naming the flower, saying it was the queen's favorite and that he'd be happy to give me seeds.

But if I had really asked about a flower, he'd probably have continued strolling. He'd have thought, "Why does this prince clutter up a lovely day with talk? If I don't answer him, he may breathe in the sweet air, feel the gentle sun, hear the rustling leaves. Perhaps by now he regrets his question. But perhaps he thinks me rude for not answering him. However, if I speak now, I may startle him. Which would be worse? It would be worse to have

him think me rude. I must speak." But, exhausted by his cogitation, he'd have energy left for only one word, the name of the flower.

I'm writing nonsense. In my first letter I had hoped to impress you with my brilliant prose, but that will have to wait for my second.

Not many of my imagined conversations are with the duke. Most of them are with you.

I know what I would say if I were in Frell. I'd tell you at least three times how glad I was to see you. I'd speak more about Ayortha (and with fewer complaints), and I'd describe my trip here, especially our adventure when one of the packhorses shied at a rabbit and tore off. But then I might turn Ayorthaian and trail off into silence, lost in smiling at you.

The trouble is, I can't guess at your response. You surprise me so often. I like to be surprised, but if I could supply your answers with confidence, I might miss you less. The remedy is obvious. You must write to me again and quickly. And again, and more quickly.

Your very good friend,  
Char

In my reply, I gave him conversation.

Greetings. How do you fare today? Lovely weather we've been having. The farmers predict rain, however. They say the crows are chattering. Ah well, wet weather will do us good, I daresay. We can't have sunny days always. Life isn't like that, is it? Wish it were. Wouldn't that be fine? Never a disappointment, never a harsh word.



Don't you agree, sir? A fine fellow such as yourself, you have sense enough to see it's never that way.

In one dose, I hope I have cured you of your desire for conversation.

My pen stopped. What could I tell him? I couldn't explain my servitude without telling about the curse. Then I recollected that Mum Olga had recently held a cotillion. I described it, omitting the detail that my participation had been limited to removing the dirty plates from the refreshments table.

Char's reply was that the Ayorthaians didn't have balls.

They have "sings," which are held monthly. Three or four Ayorthaians at a time occupy the stage in turn and sing long, sad ballads or happy tunes or funny ones, joined by the whole throng in the choruses. The entire populace knows thousands of songs, and there is hardly a mediocre voice among them.

Sound gushes forth from somewhere deep, their toes or their souls. For the last song, a paean to the rising sun (because they have performed through the night), they gather their families about them. Husbands and wives and children clasp hands, tilt their heads heavenward, and release their music.

And I, seated with the few other visitors, add my weak voice to theirs, humming when I can't guess the words and wishing my hands were held too.

Perhaps we can come here together someday.

By the way, you are a month older than the last time I saw you. Are you still too young to marry?

I chuckled at the joke. Then I thought of the bride I'd make, in a threadbare, sooty gown that stank of cooking fat and yesterday's dinner.

Char repeated the query in every letter, probably because my answers were so silly that they pleased him. If not too young, I was too tired to marry or too wet or too cross or too hungry. Once I wrote, "If my years are measured by inches, then I am certainly too young. The eleven-year-old daughter of an acquaintance dwarfs me."

The acquaintance was Nancy, the serving maid.

Another time I wrote, "Today I am too old to marry, a hundred at least. I have spent the last eighty years and more listening to a lady detail the pedigree of every dinner guest tonight."

The lady had been Hattie, and I had not attended the meal.

I continued in a more serious vein. "I have not found anyone in my stepfamily's circle in whom I can confide. And there are few subjects about which my stepsisters and I share an opinion. It is great good luck that I have a pen and paper and a friend."

Char's answer: "My tongue may wither from disuse here, but at least I shan't lose words entirely while I still can write to you."

Sometimes I wondered what would happen if I told Char that I was just the right age to marry. With each of his letters I fell more in love with him. But I couldn't tell him. If I said I was old enough to marry and his question had only been the continuation of a good joke, he would be horribly embarrassed and our easy friendship would be ruined. He might stop writing, which I couldn't



endure. If he wasn't jesting, it was for him to say so. Until then or never, I treasured our correspondence.

In his next letter he wrote,

I don't know when I learned I would be king. It seems I've always known it. But two stories are told, and I've heard them so often they seem to be memories. One has me as hero; the other is not so flattering.

A lute was given to me when I was six and my sister, Cecilia, was four. She coveted it and plucked at it whenever she could. Finally, I presented it to her, an act that signified to the servants that I would be a generous king. They never considered how indifferent a musician I was. My protestations that it was a small sacrifice to part with something I had little use for were taken as modesty, another fine kingly quality.

However, I'm not sure how modesty figures in my retelling the tale to you. I do so because I want you to know I have qualities that others admire. What you will conclude from the next anecdote I cannot guess.

I was in the streets of Erell with my father when a man pelted him with an overripe tomato. While wiping at his clothes, my father spoke kindly to the man and ended by resolving his grievance. Afterward, I asked why the man hadn't been punished. When Father told me I'd understand by the time I became king, I said I didn't want to be king if people threw tomatoes at me. I said it seemed a thankless task.

Father roars with laughter when he tells this tale. Now I know why: It is a thankless task, but tomatoes are the least of it.

The conclusion I drew from this story was that Char wasn't above laughing at himself. Of course, he wasn't perfect. Eager to share his knowledge on any subject, he neglected to ascertain the interest of his listener or, in my case, reader. He wrote more about Ayortha than I ever wished to know: how the guilds were structured; the number of gallons of milk produced in a year by one Ayorthaian cow; the construction of their manors. And yet more.

This was a minor flaw. He confessed a more serious one.

You are almost my sole confidant in this. The other is my horse, to whom I tell everything—because he can't condemn or offer advice. I write it to you because you must know all. I trust you to find the good in me, but the bad I must be sure you don't overlook.

I am slow to anger, but also slow to forgive. For example, my languages tutor had a way of making me feel a fool. I endured his abuse but learned less than I might have if he'd been encouraging. Cecilia, who inherited his instruction after me, received the same treatment. The first time I found her crying, I warned him. The second time, I dismissed him. Father trusted my judgment enough to let my action stand.

I went further. Boy as I was, I took measures to ensure the tutor would teach no more. But although my victory was complete and the man was ruined, and six years have passed, the thought of him still infuriates me. I am angry now as I write these words.

You may excuse me on the grounds of being a kind



brother, which I hope I am. But I wonder at my rage. And I wonder too if my action against the tutor was at bottom a case of refusing (in another form) to let someone throw a tomato at me or my family.

In reply I wrote,

Mandy says there are two sorts of people in the world: those who blame everyone else and those who blame only themselves. I place myself in a third category: among those who know where blame really lies. You stand condemned. Your crime: too much zeal in the protection of those you love. A fault and a virtue. Heinous!

Although you've revealed your shortcomings to me, I feel compelled to no such frankness. You must discover my faults for yourself. And, although you've said it goes against the grain, you must find a way to forgive them.

I remember the date of Char's next letter: Thursday, May 24. He'd been gone half a year. Although the letter arrived in the morning, I was unable to read it all day. At dawn I had to scrub the flagstones in our courtyard for Mum Olga. Then Olive ordered me to count her coins in their thousands—repeatedly, because she kept thinking I had made a mistake. In the evening Hattie had me help her prepare for a ball, including plucking out the hairs that grew in profusion above her upper lip.

By the time Hattie departed, I was too late to help Mandy clean the kitchen. The rest of the night was mine to use as I liked.

In my room I opened my little window and let the cool air wash over me. Then I lit the bit of candle

Mandy had smuggled to me, placing it carefully out of the breeze. I sat on my cot and opened my letter.

Dear Ella,

Impatience is not usually my weakness. But your letters torment me. They make me long to saddle my horse and ride to Frell, where I would make you explain yourself.

They are playful, interesting, thoughtful, and (occasionally) serious. I'm overjoyed to receive them, yet they bring misery. You say little of your daily life; I have no idea how you occupy yourself. I don't mind; I enjoy guessing at the mystery. But what I really long to know you do not tell either: what you feel, although I've given you hints by the score of my regard.

You like me. You wouldn't waste time or paper on a being you didn't like. But I think I've loved you since we met at your mother's funeral. I want to be with you forever and beyond, but you write that you are too young to marry or too old or too short or too hungry—until I crumple your letters up in despair, only to smooth them out again for a twelfth reading, hunting for hidden meanings.

Father asks frequently in his letters whether I fancy any Ayorthaian young lady or any in our acquaintance at home. I say no. I suppose I'm confessing another fault: pride. I don't want him to know that I love if my affections are not returned.

You would charm him, and Mother too. They would be yours completely. As I am.

What a beautiful bride you'll be, whomever you marry at whatever age. And what a queen if I am the



man! Who has your grace? Your expression? Your voice? I could extol your virtues endlessly, but I want you to finish reading and answer me quickly.

Today I cannot write of Ayortha or my doings or anything. I can only post this and wait.

Love (it is such relief to pen the word!), love, love—  
Char

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

**J**gaped at the page. Read it again. And gaped again. In my daze, I noticed that my sooty thumb had left marks on the letter.

He loved me. He'd loved me as long as he'd known me!

I hadn't loved him as long, perhaps, but now I loved him equally well, or better. I loved his laugh, his handwriting, his steady gaze, his honorableness, his freckles, his appreciation of my jokes, his hands, his determination that I should know the worst of him. And, most of all, shameful though it might be, I loved his love for me.

Placing my candle carefully, I danced and whirled around my room.

I could marry Char and live with my love.

I could leave Mum Olga and her spawn.

No one would give me orders.

This was an unexpected solution to my trouble. Lucinda would have hated for me to evade my obedience by rising above it. And even Mandy would be surprised by this method of ending the curse.

I extracted paper from the hiding place at the bottom of my wardrobe. My love shouldn't have an extra moment of impatience.

However, my stub of a candle flickered out as soon as I wrote, "Dearest Char, darling Char, beloved Char."