the love we think we deserve
by vapiddreamscape

Summary

When Princess Aveline goes to King Thrushbeard's castle, she simply wants a treaty with his country to keep her borders from being threatened. She doesn't expect to stop his wedding and smuggle his wayward wife out of the country.

But it's not like he doesn't deserve it.

Notes

Work title from Steven Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*: "We accept the love we think we deserve."

Chapter title from this quote by Joseph Conrad: “Being a woman is a terribly difficult trade since it consists principally of dealings with men.”

See the end of the work for more notes.
a terribly difficult trade

Princess Aveline does not want to come to King Thrushbeard’s court. Her mother refuses to listen to protest, pressing for negotiations to begin at once. After all, an alliance with the might of the Rhine may be the only thing to protect their small kingdom from the threats of Vogelwald. She understands this perhaps better than anyone, considering the throne will fall into her hands upon the death of her mother, but that doesn't mean she likes it. The closer they draw to Castle Rhine, the more stories she hears of the man. She almost turns her train around more times than she can count. Only the look on her mother’s face when she learns of her daughter’s failure keeps her moving forward.

The man they call King Thrushbeard reminds her of her father as soon as she sees him. It leaves a sour taste in her mouth as they lead her to her rooms. It's not his looks: he's handsome where her father was plain, despite his crooked chin. Rather, it is their similar bearing. Not the haughtiness indicative of the privilege that comes with royalty. It’s the flashing in their eyes, that look that says they know they're the cleverest in the room and they're not afraid to use that against you.

She feels the phantom pain of her father’s long-buried words for hours after the fires go out.

Fueled by too few hours of sleep and too many memories of her father’s whip-like insults, she whirls into King Thrushbeard’s throne room like the tornadoes that ravaged her countryside last spring. He lounges against one of the overly-intricate arms, the negative slope of his shoulders conveying his boredom more eloquently than words ever could.

“Who might you be? I have a meeting and no time for lost little girls desperate to throw themselves at the feet of king.”

Steel fortifies her spine and injects itself into her words. “I am Princess Aveline, crown princess of Atherin and heir to the throne, so there is no need for me to throw myself at your feet, so to speak. However, if that were my goal, I would not be lost would I, for I would have found the feet of the king?” She offers him her most demure smile, but can’t help the slight thrill of satisfaction that courses through her.

His brow furrows. “You are the diplomat from Atherin?”

“Yes, your Majesty. My people are looking forward to treating with yours. An alliance between the Rhine and Atherin will be of benefit for both of us.”

“Then they will have to keep looking forward a bit longer.”

“Excuse me?”

His eyes rake over hand and she feels naked before him. “I will not treat with people like you. Come back when you have brought a more adept diplomat.”

“Trust me when I say I am the most adept diplomat in my mother’s court. In the last year alone, I have secured trade and arms agreement with both Vrnid and Gast to the benefit of every party involved.”

“If you are the best Atherin can offer, I do not think an alliance between our two countries is in my best interest.”

She tries to keep the rage out of her voice, but it sharpens her words enough even she can feel their
“Is it because I am a woman? Or maybe that is not of import to you. Maybe it is because my skin and that of my people is darker than yours?” He remains silent. “I would appreciate an answer, King Thrushbeard, so I can give my mother an explanation as to why you will not treat with a fellow monarch.”

“Tell her to send a man to do a man’s job next time.” He shakes his head. “I should have expected no less from a country run by women.”

“With all due respect, your Majesty, I came here to unite us against a common enemy. Please remember that whatever follows could have been avoided had you been willing to do the same.”

“What does that mean?”

Aveline shrugs. “It means whatever you make of it, King Thrushbeard.” She turns to leave, pride at her little victory almost enough to take the sting from defeat of her ultimate goal.

“Wait,” he calls, stopping her in her track. She turns slowly, ready to shoot more barbs from her tongue. “Won’t you stay for the wedding, Princess Aveline?”

“And why should I do that?” she counters.

His smile reminds her so much of her father in the years before his death, Aveline has to fend off the urge to punch him right in his crooked chin. “The world knows you have come here and they know why. A princess cannot spit without people from here to Vogelwald questioning their motivations. Should you leave before my wedding next week, they will know you failed in your quest for alliance and they will know Atherin is weak as everyone thinks it is. However, should you stay as the rest of the foreign dignitaries arrive, eat at my left hand at the wedding feast,” he leers at her, “they can come to their own conclusions. Maybe you’ll even find someone willing to treat with your pathetic excuse for a nation at the reception.”

Her cheeks flame at the insult but, as much as she hates to admit it, the prince is right. Atherin is small and desperate for allies. The Rhine has no want of friends, despite their iciness with Vogelwald. She cannot afford to show she has already reached a stalemate with one of the few countries that matches the might of their shared enemy. Perhaps she can start making overtures in friendlier waters, though she is loathe to accept any help from this man.

“I did not know you were betrothed,” she says, in lieu of confirmation. He knows he’s won, in any case. His ego needs no more inflamation,

“It’s rather new news.”

“Might I know her name?”

“We’re keeping her identity a secret. There are plenty of people out there who would pay good money to kill the future queen of the Rhine.”

“Pity.”

King Thrushbeard cocks a brow. ‘Why is that?’

“I had hoped to send her my condolences.”

Aveline doesn’t look back as she exits his throne room, but she likes to imagine he watches her leave with mouth agape. It’s the look she always wished to see on her father’s face; she suppose this consolation prize is as good as any.
Chapter Summary

Aveline attends King Thrushbeard's wedding and possibly starts a war.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from this quote: “Well-behaved women seldom make history.” — Laurel Thatcher Ulrich

The first thing Aveline notices about King Thrushbeard's wedding is that it is a desperate display of power. Despite what he insinuated to her and all other attendees, there is no uniting service, odd in and of itself. Nobles with a kingdom the size of the Rhine love nothing more than laborious affairs of state at which to posture and preen. According to rumor, the wedding had occurred a few weeks earlier in private, apparently for fear Vogelwald would take the opportunity to commit an act of war. Thrushbeard wasn't wrong in saying there are those who would love to kill the Rhine’s queen consort.

But the fact he can summon so many allies in just over a week is a blatant show of the armies under his thumb. Dozens upon dozens of kingdoms from around the world wear their colors on this day. It almost makes up for running scared on the wedding itself. Aveline would be impressed if it were anyone else who called the gathering.

The second thing she notices is a vaguely familiar girl hovering in the shadows of a doorway between the kitchens and the ballroom. A woman really, with gaunt face and dirt-smudged elbows. She seems a miserable thing, downcast eyes occasionally flicking up to marvel at the activities around her. Every so often, a server will drop a few scraps at her feet as they carry in empty platter. She scrapes every last bit from the stone and places it in her apron pocket. Yet, somehow, she remains understatedly radiant.

Aveline can't stop looking at her, which perhaps explains why she doesn’t notice Thrushbeard’s entry until he grabs the poor maiden by the arm and attempts to whisk her to the center of the room. She attempts to yank away, dark eyes wide with fright, but his grip noticeably increases at her fight. They have almost sparred their way to the center of the room when a crash sounds. Whatever held the girl's pocket together has snapped and the scraps she stored go flying, soup oozing across the floor.

The room goes silent. But it's a fragile thing and the first peal of laughter shatters it entirely. Soon, the entire room is shaking with it, all but Aveline and the girl participating.

Aveline shoulders her way through the coalescing crowd as the peasant girl's face flushes crimson. She reaches the front just as the girl finishes gathering her things. She tries to run for the stairs, though she trips just before she passes Aveline. Aveline offers her hand but the girl refuses, pushing to her feet As she does, their lock and Aveline realizes why she found the girl so familiar.
“Princess Zahra?”

Before she can respond, King Thrushbeard whisks her back to the center of attention and says, voice loud enough for the gathered company to hear, “Fear not. I am the minstrel with whom you have been living in that miserable little hut for the better part of the year. I am the rogue who broke your pottery in the market.”

“W-Why?” Zahra stammers. It may have been a few years since Aveline spoke with Riadh's crown princess, but this timid creature is not the proud woman she remembers giggling with while their fathers discussed affairs of state and scorning the boys who ran through the castle with increasing degrees of severity.

“To humble your proud and haughty spirit. To punish you for the arrogance with which you ridiculed me. For love of you, I did those things.”

She falls to her knees, tears carving tracks down her dirty face. “I am not worthy to be your wife. I am not worthy of your love.”

At this, Aveline breaks free of the crowd and glares daggers at King Thrushbeard. “That is not love,” she spits. “And if that is what you believe it to be, I pity you.”

He whirls to face her, eyes attempting to pierce her with their flame. “Who dares insult me in such a way, before my wife no less?”

“If what you say is true, that poor woman is no more your wife than I am, thank the gods.”

He stalks toward her, hands balled into fists at his side, vein at his temple threatening to burst through his skin. “I will have your head if you do not stop at once.”

Aveline presses forward until she is near the center of the loose circle, almost chest to chest with the fuming man. She glares up at him despite the trembling in her soul. “The laws of these lands state that no man make take an unwilling woman for his bride and no woman may take an unwilling man as her groom. Should this be proven fact, your farce of a marriage will be rendered null and void.” Her voice booms across the hall, the rest of the crown fallen silent at the implications of her charge.

Zahra cowers behind his broad shoulders as Thrushbeard pulls back. “I have done no such thing. These charges are pure libel because I refuse to treat with a country weak as yours. If you do not slink back from whence you came, Atherin will feel the full might of the Rhine.”

Aveline scoffs. “Every man and woman, and those between know my words to be true. They also know who birthed your title, King Christopher...or should I say, Thrushbeard. Princess Zahra’s tongue is the stuff of legends, as many in this room have experienced first hand. She denied you as thoroughly as she did the rest of them. Yet, here we are a year later with you claiming her as your wife.”

He opens his mouth to volley something back at her when the Zahra’s father stumbles into the small crowd at the center of the ballroom. Aveline can smell the ale on his breath from yards away and for a brief, terrifying moment, she wonders if her father’s ghost has returned to punish her for her insolence. She feels the bite of his phantom words, slurred sibilants slicing into her skin and she takes a reflexive step back.

“It’s valid,” Zahra’s father stumbles over his words as well as his feet, nothing like Aveline’s ghost. “I ap-ap-approved the match. First beggar who came to my door, I said. Always keep my
word.” He points to Thrushbeard. “You pretended to be a...mistrial. Minister. Something with music.”

“It matters not whether the king approved it, unless he happened to be the one being wed,” Aveline counters.

“Then shouldn’t we ask the bride? She is right here.” Thrushbeard steps to the side and makes a demonstrative gesture to the cowering princess. “My sweet, did you or did you not consent to marry me?”

Biting her lip, Zahra nods. “I am not worthy of him but I wish to be his.” Eyes cast to the floor and hands wringing in her stained apron, this is not the girl Aveline befriended in her youth. This is a woman broken time and time again, punished until the only thing left to do was submit. It fills her with the rage of a white-hot metal refusing to be tempered.

“She cannot consent to marriage under pretense.”

“There was none.”

“Princess Zahra believed you to be a minstrel at the time of your wedding. You have only just revealed yourself to her as the king you truly are. Even had she freely agreed to marry you at the time of your marriage, though that too is under question, it is invalid at this point and your deception over the past year could very well be considered criminal.”

Murmurs of assent follow her words throughout the room, more than she ever expected to turn against the gossamer king. He splutters. “She loves me, so she has said. Should our union be deemed invalid by a court of lying naysayers, I shall wed her again and our marriage will be so recognized.” King Thrushbeard attempts to wrap an arm around Zahra’s shoulder and she shrinks from the contact until she shrugs it off altogether.

“You have abused this woman for a year and left her a shell of what she once was. She cannot agree to be lawfully wed to you after such events. If you pursue such of course of action, Atherin and its allies will not recognize such a union so as long as my line holds the throne.”

It’s his turn to scoff. “What allies? You came here on your knees begging for my assistance. You and your country will support me in this or you will leave on your knees at the mercy of Vogelwald, alone once more. No country aligned with the Rhine will come to your aid.”

The declaration is exactly what this farce of a wedding celebration turned out to be: a desperate display of power to prove he is not running scared from her accusations, when it is obvious to anyone in the room he’s quaking at them.

“It is true we have few powerful allies” Aveline replies. “However, if you are the best the Rhine has to offer, I do not think an alliance between our two countries is in Atherin’s best interest.”

His jaw nearly scrapes the ground at her declaration and there it is: the look she always craved to see on her father’s face while he lived, reflected in the young king whose actions are so similar to his it hurts. “In any case, I will not be leaving alone. I will be taking your wife with me.”

Aveline takes a few steps forward and grabs Zahra by the hand. The girl attempts to pull away as Thrushbeard starts calling for guards to remove the Atherin princess at once; there’s a decent chance Aveline just started a war.

Aveline lets her go, but Zahra doesn’t move, instead staring at the hand that just released her.
“I’m afraid,” she whispers, barely audible over the roaring chatter.

“I know. But I will do everything in my power to keep you from harm. I can’t say how much that is, but it’s a far cry more than what this place has to offer.”

Aveline puts forward that hand this time, a choice. Zahra glances up from the offer and they make eye contact again, dark brown meeting hazel-green. Her fingers wrap loosely around Aveline’s and her face is so full of hope it almost breaks something in Aveline.

“Please,” she whispers.
Chapter Summary

A year and a day later, Zahra comes to a few realizations she shares with Aveline.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*: “I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will.”

They sit on the edge of a stone jetty, the tide lapping at their toes. The sea before them is a roiling mirror, and Aveline wonders if she can count the stars dancing across its surface. A slight breeze off the water is enough to banish the irrepressible summer stickiness for the time being, and Aveline leans back on her palms, basking in the relief.

Zahra, however, has her knees clutched tight to her chest. The hem of her dress is occasionally licked by the incoming waves though she seems not to notice. Her long, dark brown waves curtain her face, and she seems to be staring at her feet as if they hold the answers to every question in the universe. By the light of the nearly full moon, Aveline can see the knuckles of one hand stand out starkly against her skin.

She resists the urge to close the feet between them and smooth away the tension. Zahra still flinches away from the smallest unrequested touch and Aveline refuses to be the person who causes her any more stress. Not after how far she’s come. No longer does she cower from everyone larger than her (Given how thin her year in poverty had made her, that was everyone.) She had her last panic attack over two weeks ago, and the days she hides in her rooms are vastly outnumbered by those she wanders the hall of Atherin’s summer palaces, reading books and humming quietly to herself.

No, she won’t set that back at all.

Instead, she asks, “What are you thinking about?”

Her voice is small as she looks up through her sweep of hair and replies, “Christopher...King Thrushbeard.”

Aveline doesn’t question her. She still thinks about her father, though he’s been dead going on five years. There are nights where all she can hear are the words “worthless” and “disgusting”.

Instead, she asks, “Do you want to talk about it?”

“So you know how long I’ve been here?”

“About a year.”

She pushes her hair behind her ear and sits up more fully, knees pulled ever closer. “A year and a
day.”

“Wow. Time moves so quickly.”

“Faster than the year before it, I suppose.” She pushes her hair over her shoulder and pushes back to draw level with Aveline, stretching her legs before her now that she doesn’t have to hold her thoughts inside anymore. “Do you know what this means? I’ve been free of him longer than he had me.” She laughs, and it sounds like the music to which the stars on the water set their dance. “And I think...”

“What?”

“I think that means I can really be free.”

“You’ve been free since you came here.” Aveline’s surprised by the desperation in her voice, but there’s something vitally important in knowing that Zahra is sure of that fact.

“I know.” She looks back at the sprawling ocean. “Still, I’ve been waiting for him to come back and me to be weak enough to follow him because he’s all I deserve. But if I can survive longer without him than with him...I’m strong enough on my own.”

“You are one of the strongest people I know.” She finds herself shifting closer, not enough to completely close the distance, but enough to remind Zahra she’s still here.

“I’ve been talking a lot to your mother. About your father mostly. She understands, a bit. But, she loved him I think. I’m not sure I ever loved Chris. Love should never feel like a you have to become a perversion of yourself.”

No. It feels like sunrise and firelight pressed deep into her skin every time she looks at Zahra.

She didn’t mean for this to happen. She wanted nothing more than to help a girl broken but somewhere along the road of coaxing smiles, talking about books and music when the rest of the world seemed too complex to put into words, finding those words the moment it mattered and talking about fathers who made them feel less than human, it did. Now she feels a little helpless every time they make eye contact.

It’s a secret she’ll carry to her grave. Zahra has spent too long harried by expectations, first from a father that didn’t understand then a husband who thought people were something you could tame. Zahra interrupts her musings, still not looking at her. “I’ve been thinking about what I want, what I don’t want, didn’t want and I realized a few things.”

“Like?” Aveline prompts.

“It’s not my fault. Should I have been kinder? Yes. The world in and of itself should be. Am I kinder because of this? As much as he would like to think, he did not fix me. He didn’t make me anything other than afraid.”

“I’m sorry.”

She holds up a hand, still refusing to meet Aveline’s eye. “I am still afraid. But I refuse to let the memory of his actions keep me locked away. If that happens, he wins. Any kindness I have comes from healing myself from his memory. From the safety you and your mother have offered me. I will try to be kinder, not because he forced it upon me but because there is not enough in this world. Because I know how being the recipient of that rare kindness feels, thanks to you.”
It is then she looks at Aveline and the latter feels as though her heart may explode. Somehow, she can now count a handful of inches between them instead of feet and she knows her traitorous heart is at fault. “I am incredibly proud of you,” she says, choked by the tightness of her throat.

“One more thing.” Zahra’s voice has soften into a whisper barely louder than the tapering breeze. “I realized why I refused to marry those men my father paraded before me.” After a few moments of dumbfounded silence on Aveline’s part, she presses, “Aren’t you going to ask?”

“It is not my place.”

“It is most certainly your place. Put simply, I did not know those men. I think, in my case, I need more than a glance, a brief conversation, before I can give myself to someone, heart or body. I think I must know them and they must know me. See my worst moments, my best, and understand. I need someone to know the brightness of my heart and the darkness of my pain, or close to it. Maybe I just fell too hard for the idea of soulmates as a young child, but I think I need to let someone see my soul before I offer it to them.”

“And one day, you will find him.”

There are no longer inches to count between them, and Aveline wonders if Zahra was the one shrinking the space between them all this time. “Who said it had to be him?” Her breath catches as Zahra’s fingertips trace her hairline, come down to cup her jaw ever so gently. “I have already found you.”

She brings her hand up with the half-formed plan of brushing her away, making her think about what exactly she was saying, reminding her she doesn’t owe her anything. Instead, she finds her hand pressing Zahra’s, as if to remind herself this is actually happening. Still, she has to say something, otherwise this will feel like taking advantage of that broken woman she’s seen rebuild herself over the past year and day.

“You don’t have to. I didn’t mean to push this.”

She expect Zahra to pull away, but instead, her grip becomes more sure, though it’s not enough to even think about hurting. “You pushed nothing. I appreciate your concern, but I suppose I have realized something else as well.”

“What?”

“This world is mine to do with as I choose. I choose you, if you’ll have me.”

“And of course. I choose you too.”

Zahra’s hand comes up to caress the other side of her jaw. “Can I kiss you?”

“Please,” she whispers.

For a moment, they flash back to a year and a day ago, when they were standing in the middle of a ballroom and Zahra grabbed her hands, so full of hope Aveline thought she might burst. The moment ends as quickly as it began as their lips meet somewhere in the middle of the remaining space between them. Aveline’s not sure if she started it or Zahra did. It’s slow at first, a soft slide of lips, but Aveline tips her head slightly, and everything begins to feel a little fuzzy around the edges. She’s no longer sure where she ends and Zahra begins as her hands come to rest on Zahra’s hips and Zahra’s hands slide back into her braids and it’s not sunrise and firelight anymore. It’s the salt of the ocean and the encroaching waves and the stars that seem to be dancing
across their skin and into their hearts.

Eventually, they pull apart, slightly breathless. Zahra traces the curve of Aveline’s lower lip. “He was so wrong.”

“How about what?”

“I am worthy of so much more than him.”

Aveline kisses her again and again and again, to prove just how true that is. And Zahra kisses back to prove she believes it.

End Notes

Originally posted on my writing tumblr, The Fairytale Project.

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