

# WE RIDE THE STORM



DEVIN MADSON

# **We Ride the Storm**

The Reborn Empire: Book One

**Devin Madson**



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Orbit  
Hachette Book Group  
1290 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, NY 10104  
[www.orbitbooks.net](http://www.orbitbooks.net)

First Orbit eBook Edition: January 2020  
Originally published in 2018

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ISBN: 978-0-316-53627-1 (ebook)

E3-20191127-JV-NF-ORI

# Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Map](#)

[Chapter 1: Miko](#)

[Chapter 2: Rah](#)

[Chapter 3: Cassandra](#)

[Chapter 4: Miko](#)

[Chapter 5: Rah](#)

[Chapter 6: Cassandra](#)

[Chapter 7: Miko](#)

[Chapter 8: Cassandra](#)

[Chapter 9: Rah](#)

[Chapter 10: Miko](#)

[Chapter 11: Rah](#)

[Chapter 12: Miko](#)

[Chapter 13: Cassandra](#)

[Chapter 14: Rah](#)

[Chapter 15: Cassandra](#)

[Chapter 16: Miko](#)

[Chapter 17: Cassandra](#)

[Chapter 18: Rah](#)

[Chapter 19: Miko](#)

[Chapter 20: Rah](#)

[Chapter 21: Miko](#)

[Chapter 22: Cassandra](#)

[Chapter 23: Miko](#)

[Chapter 24: Rah](#)

[Chapter 25: Cassandra](#)

[Chapter 26: Miko](#)

[Chapter 27: Rah](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Discover More](#)

[Extras](#)

[Meet the Author](#)

[Interview](#)

[A Preview of \*We Lie with Death\*](#)

[A Preview of \*The Throne of the Five Winds\*](#)

[By Devin Madson](#)

*For my Doom Toddler, whose tireless energy and unconditional love are an enduring joy, and whose continued daytime naps allowed this book to be written.*

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Levanti Plains

EYE SEA

THE DRY  
CORDUNUM

CASTELLARIA  
The Ribbon  
GENAVA

ILLYRA

AURELLA

PARVUM

LONNIN

CHILTAE

SECOVUM

KURO MOUNTAINS

RINA

TIAN

KOI

Ji

JINANTON

LIN'YA

KOI CASTLE

SUWAY

ESVAR

RISIAN

KOGAHAERA

The Valley

Nivi Fen

SHIMAI

Tzitzir River

ME'LIAN

SYAN

GIANA

ANXI

TS'AI

# Chapter 1

## Miko

They tried to kill me four times before I could walk. Seven before I held any memory of the world. Every time thereafter I knew fear, but it was anger that chipped sharp edges into my soul.

I had done nothing but exist. Nothing but own the wrong face and the wrong eyes, the wrong ancestors and the wrong name. Nothing but be Princess Miko Ts'ai. Yet it was enough, and not a day passed in which I did not wonder whether today would be the day they finally succeeded.

Every night I slept with a blade beneath my pillow, and every morning I tucked it into the intricate folds of my sash, its presence a constant upon which I dared build dreams. And now those dreams felt close enough to touch. We were travelling north with the imperial court. Emperor Kin was about to name his heir.

As was my custom on the road, I rose while the inn was still silent, only the imperial guards awake about their duties. In the palace they tended to colonise doorways, but here, without great gates and walls to protect the emperor, they filled every corner. They were in the main house and in the courtyard, outside the stables and the kitchens and servants' hall—two nodded in silent acknowledgement as I made my way toward the bathhouse, my dagger heavy in the folds of my dressing robe.

Back home in the palace, baths had to be taken in wooden tubs, but many northern inns had begun building Chiltaen-style bathhouses—deep

stone pools in which one could sink one's whole body. I looked forward to them every year, and as I stepped into the empty building, a little of my tension left me. A trio of lacquered dressing screens provided the only places someone could hide, so I walked a slow lap through the steam to check them all.

Once I was sure I was alone, I abandoned my dressing robe and slid into the bath. Despite the steam rising from the damp stones, the water was merely tepid, though the clatter of someone shovelling coals beneath the floor promised more warmth to come. I shivered and glanced back at my robe, the bulk of my knife beneath its folds, reassuring.

I closed my eyes only for quick steps to disturb my peace. No assassin would make so much noise, but my hand was still partway to the knife before Lady Sichi Manshin walked in. "Oh, Your Highness, I'm sorry. I didn't realise you were here. Shall I—"

"No, don't go on my account, Sichi," I said, relaxing back into the water. "The bath is big enough for both of us, though I warn you, it's not as warm as it looks."

She screwed up her nose. "Big enough for the whole court, really."

"Yes, but I hope the whole court won't be joining us."

"Gods no. I do not wish to know what Lord Rasten looks like without his robe."

Sichi untied hers as she spoke, owning none of the embarrassment I would have felt had our positions been reversed. She took her time about it, seemingly in no hurry to get in the water and hide her fine curves, but eventually she slid in beside me with a dramatic shiver. "Oh, you weren't kidding about the temperature."

Letting out a sigh, she settled back against the stones with only her shoulders above the waterline. Damp threads of hair trailed down her long neck like dribbles of ink, the rest caught in a loose bun pinned atop her head with a golden comb. Lady Sichi was four years older than my twin and I, but her lifelong engagement to Tanaka had seen her trapped at court since our birth. If I was the caged dragon he laughingly called me, then she was a caged songbird, her beauty less in her features than in her habits, in the way she moved and laughed and spoke, in the turn of her head and the set of her hands, in the graceful way she danced through the world.

I envied her almost as much as I pitied her.

Her thoughts seemed to have followed mine, for heaving another sigh, Lady Sichi slid through the water toward me. “Koko.” Her breath was warm against my skin as she drew close. “Prince Tanaka never talks to me about anything, but you—”

“My brother—”

Sichi’s fingers closed on my shoulder. “I know, hush, listen to me, please. I just... I just need to know what you know before I leave today. Will His Majesty name him heir at the ceremony? Is he finally going to give his blessing to our marriage?”

I turned to find her gaze raking my face. Her grip on my shoulder tightened, a desperate intensity in her digging fingers that jolted fear through my heart.

“Well?” she said, drawing closer still. “Please, Koko, tell me if you know. It’s... it’s important.”

“Have you heard something?” My question was hardly above a breath, though I was sure we were alone, the only sound of life the continued scraping of the coal shoveller beneath our feet.

“No, oh no, just the talk. That His Majesty is seeking a treaty with Chiltae, and they want the succession confirmed before they talk terms.”

It was more than I had heard, but I nodded rather than let her know it.

“I leave for my yearly visit to my family today,” she went on when I didn’t answer. “I want—I *need* to know if there’s been any hint, anything at all.”

“Nothing,” I said, that single word encompassing so many years of uncertainty and frustration, so many years of fear, of knowing Tana and I were watched everywhere we went, that the power our mother held at court was all that kept us safe. “Nothing at all.”

Sichi sank back, letting the water rise above her shoulders as though it could shield her from her own uncertain position. “Nothing?” Her sigh rippled the surface of the water. “I thought maybe you’d heard something, but that he just wasn’t telling me because he...” The words trailed off. She knew that I knew, that it wasn’t only this caged life we shared but also the feeling we were both invisible.

I shook my head and forced a smile. “Say all that is proper to your family from us, won’t you?” I said, heartache impelling me to change the subject. “It must be hard on your mother having both you and your father

always at court.”

Her lips parted and for a moment I thought she would ask more questions, but after a long silence, she just nodded and forced her own smile. “Yes,” she said. “Mama says she lives for my letters because father’s are always full of military movements and notes to himself about new orders and pay calculations.”

Her father was minister of the left, in command of the empire’s military, and I’d often wondered if Sichi lived at court as much to ensure the loyalty of the emperor’s most powerful minister as because she was to be my brother’s wife.

Lady Sichi chattered on as though a stream of inconsequential talk could make me forget her first whispered entreaty. I could have reassured her that we had plans, that we were close, so close, to ensuring Tanaka got the throne, but I could not trust even Sichi. She was the closest I had ever come to a female friend, though if all went to plan, she would never be my sister.

Fearing to be drawn into saying more than was safe, I hurriedly washed and excused myself, climbing out of the water with none of Sichi’s assurance. A lifetime of being told I was too tall and too shapeless, that my wrists were too thick and my shoulders too square had me grab the towel with more speed than grace and wrap it around as much of my body as it would cover. Sichi watched me, something of a sad smile pressed between her lips.

Out in the courtyard the inn showed signs of waking. The clang of pots and pans spilled from the kitchens, and a gaggle of servants hung around the central well, holding a variety of bowls and jugs. They all stopped to bow as I passed, watched as ever by the imperial guards dotted around the compound. Normally I would not have lowered my caution even in their presence, but the farther I walked from the bathhouse, the more my thoughts slipped back to what Sichi had said. She had not just wanted to know, she had *needed* to know, and the ghost of her desperate grip still clung to my shoulder.

Back in my room, I found that Yin had laid out a travelling robe and was waiting for me with a comb and a stern reproof that I had gone to the bathhouse without her.

“I am quite capable of bathing without assistance,” I said, kneeling on the matting before her.

“Yes, Your Highness, but your dignity and honour require attendance.” She began to ply her comb to my wet hair and immediately tugged on tangles. “And I could have done a better job washing your hair.”

A scuff sounded outside the door and I tensed. Yin did not seem to notice anything amiss and went on combing, but my attention had been caught, and while she imparted gossip gleaned from the inn’s servants, I listened for the shuffle of another step or the rustle of cloth.

No further sounds disturbed us until other members of the court began to wake, filling the inn with footsteps. His Majesty never liked to linger in the mornings, so there was only a short time during which everyone had to eat and dress and prepare for another long day on the road.

While I picked at my breakfast, a shout for carriers rang through the courtyard, and I moved to the window in time to see Lady Sichi emerge from the inn’s main doors. She had donned a fine robe for the occasion, its silk a shimmering weave that defied being labelled a single colour in the morning light. Within a few moments, she had climbed into the waiting palanquin with easy grace, leaving me prey to ever more niggling doubts. Now I would have to wait until the end of the summer to discover what had troubled her so much.

Before I could do more than consider running down into the yard to ask, her carriers moved off, making space for more palanquins and the emperor’s horse, which meant it wouldn’t be long until we were called to step into our carriage for another interminable day travelling. Tanaka would grumble. Edo would try to entertain him. And I would get so bored of them both I counted every mile.

Tanaka had not yet left his room, so when the gong sounded, I went to tap on his door. No answer came through the taut paper panes and I leant in closer. “Tana?”

My heart sped at the silence.

“Tana?”

I slid the door. In the centre of the shadowy room, Tanaka and Edo lay sprawled upon their mats, their covers twisted and their hands reaching across the channel toward one another. But they were not alone. A grey-clad figure crouched at my brother’s head. A blade hovered. Small. Sharp. Easy to conceal. Air punched from my lungs in a silent cry as I realised I had come too late. I could have been carrying fifty daggers and it would

have made no difference.

But the blade did not move. Didn't even tremble. The assassin looked right at me and from the hoarse depths of my first fear my cry rose to an audible scream. Yet still he just sat there, as all along the passage doors slid and footsteps came running. Tanaka woke with a start, and only then did the assassin lunge for the window. I darted forward, but my foot caught on Tanaka's legs as he tried to rise. Shutters clattered. Sunlight streamed in. Voices followed; every servant in the building suddenly seemed to be crammed into the doorway, along with half a dozen imperial guards shoving their way through.

"Your Highnesses, is everything all right?" the first demanded.

Sharp eyes hunted the room. One sneered as he looked me up and down. Another rolled his eyes. None of them had seen the man, or none of them had wanted to. Edo pushed himself into a sitting position with his arms wrapped around his legs, while Tanaka was still blinking blearily.

"Yes, we're fine," I said, drawing myself up and trying for disdain. "I stepped on a sharp reed in the matting is all. Go back about your work. We cannot leave His Majesty waiting."



"I hate being cooped up in this carriage; another day on the road will kill me more surely than any assassin," Tanaka said, stretching his foot onto the unoccupied seat beside me. "I hope His Majesty pushes through to Koi today. It's all right for him, getting to ride the whole way in the open air."

"Well, when you are emperor you can choose to ride wherever you go," I said. "You can be sure I will."

Tanaka folded his arms. "When? I wish I shared your confidence. This morning proves that His Majesty still wants me dead, and an emperor who wants me dead isn't likely to name me his heir."

It had been almost two years since the last attempt on either of our lives, and this morning's assassin had shaken me more than I dared admit. The way forward had seemed clear, the plan simple—the Chiltaens were even pressing for an announcement. I had been so sure we had found a way to force His Majesty's hand, and yet...

Across from me, the look Edo gifted Tanaka could have melted ice, but when it was returned, they were my cheeks that reddened. Such a look of complete understanding and acceptance, of true affection. Another day on the road might kill me too, if it was really possible to die of a broken heart like the ladies in the poems.

Edo caught me looking and smiled, only half the smile he kept for Tanaka. Edo had the classical Kisian features of the finest sculpture, but it was not his nose or his cheekbones or his long-lashed eyes that made the maids fight over who would bring his washing water, it was the kind way he thanked them for every service as though he were not the eldest son of Kisia's most powerful duke.

I looked out the window rather than risk inspiring his apologetic smile, for however blind Tanaka could be, Edo was not.

"His Majesty will name Grace Bachita his heir at the ceremony," Tanaka went on, scowling at his own sandal. "And make Sichi marry him instead. Not that Manshin will approve. He and Cousin Bachi have hated each other ever since Emperor Kin gave Manshin command of the army."

Edo hushed him, his expressive grimace the closest he ever came to treasonous words. He knew too well the danger. Like Sichi, he had come to court as a child and was called a guest, a member of the imperial household, to be envied such was the honour. The word *hostage* never passed any smiling courtier's lips.

Outside, four imperial guards rode alongside our carriage as they always did, rotating shifts at every stop. Sweat shone on the face of the closest, yet he maintained the faint smile I had rarely seen him without. "Captain Lassel is out there," I said, the words ending all conversation more surely than Edo's silent warning ever could.

In a moment, Tanaka was at my shoulder, peering out through the latticework. Captain Lassel could not know we were watching him, yet his ever-present little smirk made him appear conscious of it and I hated him all the more. The same smile had adorned his lips when he apologised for having let an assassin make it into my rooms on his watch. Three years had done nothing to lessen my distrust.

Tanaka shifted to the other window and, looking over Edo's shoulder, said, "Kia and Torono are on this side."

The newest and youngest members of the Imperial Guard, only sworn in



the season before. “Small comfort,” I said.

“I think Kia is loyal to Mama. Not sure about Torono.”

Again Edo hushed him, and I went on staring at the proud figure of Captain Lassel upon his horse. He had found me standing over the assassin’s body, one arm covered in blood from a wound slashed into my elbow. At fourteen I had been fully grown, yet with all the awkwardness and ill-assurance of a child, it had been impossible to hold back my tears. He had sent for my maid and removed the body and I had thanked him with a sob. The anger had come later.

The carriage began to slow. The captain rose in his stirrups, but from the window I could see nothing but the advance procession of His Majesty’s court. All horses and carriages and palanquins, flags and banners and silk.

“Why are we slowing?” Tanaka said, still peering out the opposite window. “Don’t tell me we’re stopping for the night, it’s only mid-afternoon.”

“We can’t be,” Edo said. “There are no inns within three miles of Shami Fields. He’s probably stopping to give thanks to the gods.”

Removed as we were from the front of His Majesty’s cavalcade, I had not realised where we were until Edo spoke, but even as the words left his lips, the first kanashimi blossoms came into view, their pale petals spreading from the roadside like sprinkled snow. A flower for every soldier who had died fighting for the last Otako emperor. Though more than thirty years had passed since Emperor Tianto Otako had been captured here and executed for treason, it was still a fearful sight, a reminder of what Emperor Kin Ts’ai was capable of—an emperor whose name we carried, but whose blood we did not.

Mama had whispered the truth into my ear as a child, and with new eyes I had seen the locked gates and the guards, the crowd of servants and tutors, and the lack of companions for what they were. Pretty prison bars.

The assassins hadn’t been coming for Miko Ts’ai at all. They had been coming for Miko Otako.

“Shit, Miko, look,” Tanaka said from the other side of the carriage. “Who is that? There are people in the fields. They’re carrying white flags.”

“There’s one over here too,” I said, pressing my cheek against the sun-warmed lattice. “No, two. Three! With prayer boards. And is that...?”

The carriage slowed still more and Captain Lassel manoeuvred his horse

up the line and out of view. When the carriage at last drew to a halt, I pushed open the door, stepping out before any of our guards could object. Ignoring their advice that I remain inside, I wound my way through the halted cavalcade, between mounted guards and luggage carts, hovering servants and palanquins bearing ladies too busy fanning themselves and complaining of the oppressive heat to even note my passing.

“Your Highnesses!” someone called out behind me, and I turned to see Tanaka had followed, the gold threads of his robe glinting beneath the high sun. “Your Highnesses, I must beseech you to—”

“Some of those men are carrying the Otako flag,” Tanaka said, jogging to draw level with me, all good humour leached from his expression.

“I know.”

“Slow,” he whispered as we drew near the front, and catching my hand, he squeezed it, gifting an instant of reassurance before he let go. I slowed my pace. Everywhere courtiers and councillors craned their necks to get a better view.

Some of the men blocking the road were dressed in the simple uniform of common soldiers, others the short woollen robes and pants of farmers and village folk. A few wore bright colours and finer weaves, but for the most part it was a sea of brown and blue and dirt. Their white flags fluttered from the ends of long work poles, and many of them carried prayer boards, some small, others large and covered in long lines of painted script.

Upon his dark horse, His Imperial Majesty Emperor Kin Ts'ai sat watching the scene from some twenty paces away, letting a black-robed servant talk to the apparent leader of the blockade. The emperor was conversing with one of his councillors and Father Okomi, the court priest. They might have stopped to rest their horses, so little interest did they show in the proceedings, but behind His Majesty, his personal guards sat tense and watchful in their saddles.

In the middle of the road, Mama's palanquin sat like a jewelled box, her carriers having set it down to wipe their sweaty faces and rest their arms. As we drew close, her hand appeared between the curtains, its gesture a silent order to go no farther.

“But what is—?”

I pressed my foot upon Tanaka's and his mouth snapped shut. Too many watching eyes. Too many listening ears. Perhaps it had been foolish to leave

the carriage, and yet to sit there and do nothing, to go unseen when His Majesty was mere days from announcing his heir... It was easy to get rid of people the empire had forgotten.

Only the snap and flutter of banners split the tense silence. A few guards shifted their feet. Servants set down their loads. And upon his horse, General Ryoji of the Imperial Guard made his way toward us, grim and tense.

“Your Highnesses,” he said, disapproval in every line of his aging face. “Might I suggest you return to your carriage for safety. We do not yet know what these people want.”

“For that very reason I will remain with my mother, General,” Tanaka said, earning a reluctant nod. “Who are these people?”

“Soldiers. Farmers. Small landholders. A few very brave Otako loyalists who feel they have nothing to fear expressing such ideas here. Nothing you need worry about, my prince.”

My prince. It wasn't a common turn of phrase, but we had long ago learnt to listen for such things, to hear the messages hidden in everyday words. Tanaka nodded his understanding but stayed his ground, tall and lean and confident and drawing every eye.

“General?” A guard ran toward us. “General Ryoji, His Majesty demands you order these delinquent soldiers and their company out of his way immediately.”

Ryoji did not stay to utter further warning but turned his horse about, and as he trotted toward the head of the cavalcade, I followed. “Miko,” Tanaka hissed. “We should stay here with—”

“Walk with me,” I said, returning to grip his hand and pull him along. “Let's be seen like heirs to the Crimson Throne would be seen at such a time.”

His weight dragged as Mother called a warning from behind her curtains, but I refused to be afraid and pulled him along with me.

At the front of our cavalcade, General Ryoji dismounted to stand before the protestors on equal ground. “As the commander of the Imperial Guard, I must request that you remove yourselves from our path and make your grievances known through the proper channels,” he said. “As peaceful as your protest is, continued obstruction of the emperor's roads will be seen as an act of treason.”

“Proper channels? You mean complain to the southern bastards who have been given all our commands about the southern bastards who have been given all our commands?” shouted a soldier near the front to a chorus of muttered agreement. “Or the southern administrators who have taken all the government positions?” More muttering, louder now as the rest of the blockade raised an angry cheer. “Or the Chiltaen raiders who charge into our towns and villages and burn our fields and our houses and murder our children while the border battalions do nothing?”

No sense of self-preservation could have stopped a man so consumed by anger, and he stepped forward, pointing a gnarled finger at his emperor. Emperor Kin broke off his conversation with Father Okomi and stared at the man as he railed on. “You would let the north be destroyed, you would see us all trampled into the dust because we once stood behind the Otako banner. You would—”

“General,” His Majesty said, not raising his voice, and yet no one could mistake his words. “I would continue on my way now. Remove them.”

I stared at him sitting there so calmly upon his grand horse, and the anger at his attempt on Tanaka’s life flared hot. He would as easily do away with these protestors because they inconvenienced him with their truth.

Slipping free from Tanaka, I advanced into the open space between the travelling court and the angry blockade to stand at General Ryoji’s side.

“No blood need be shed,” I said, lifting my voice. “His Majesty has come north to renew his oath and hear your grievances, and if they are all indeed as you say, then by the dictates of duty something will be done to fix them. As a representative of both the Otako family through my mother’s blood and the Ts’ai through my father’s, I thank you for your loyalty and service to Kisia but must ask you to step aside now that your emperor may pass. The gods’ representative cannot make wise decisions from the side of a road.”

Tense laughter rattled through the watchers. They had lowered their prayer boards and stood shoulder to shoulder, commoners and soldiers together watching me with hungry eyes. Their leader licked his lips, looking to General Ryoji and then to Tanaka as my twin joined me. “You ask us this as a representative of your two families,” the man said, speaking now to my brother rather than to me. “You would promise us fairness as a representative of your two families. But do you speak as His Majesty’s

heir?”

General Ryoji hissed. Someone behind me gasped. The man in the road stood stiff and proud in the wake of his bold question, but his gaze darted about, assessing risks in the manner of an old soldier.

“Your faith in me does me great honour,” Tanaka said. “I hope one day to be able to stand before you as your heir, and as your emperor, but that is the gods’ decision to make, not mine.” He spread his arms. “If you want your voices heard, then raise your prayer boards and beseech them. I would walk with you in your troubles. I would fight your battles. I would love and care for all. If the gods, in their infinite wisdom, deem me worthy, I would be humbled to serve you all to the best of my ability.”

His name rose upon a cheer, and I tried not to resent the ease with which he won their love as the crowd pressed forward, reaching out to touch him as though he were already a god. He looked like one, his tall figure garbed in gold as the people crowded in around him, some bowing to touch his feet and to thank him while others lifted their prayer boards to the sky.

We had been careful, had spoken no treason, yet the more the gathered crowd cried their love for their prince the more dangerous the scene became, and I lifted shaking hands. “Your love for my brother is overwhelming,” I said to the noise of their prayers and their cheers. “But you must now disperse. Ask them to step aside, Tana, please.”

“Isn’t this what you wanted?” he whispered. “To let His Majesty see what he ought to do?”

“He has already seen enough. Please, ask them to disperse. Now.”

“For you, dear sister.”

“Listen now.” He, too, lifted his arms, and where the crowd had ignored me, they descended into awed silence for him. “It is time to step aside now and make way for His Imperial Majesty, representative of the gods and the great shoulders upon which Kisia—”

While Tanaka spoke, I looked around to see the emperor’s reaction, but a dark spot in the blue sky caught my eye. An arrow arced toward us, slicing through the air like a diving hawk.

“Watch out!”

Someone screamed. The crowd pushed and shoved in panic and Tanaka and I were trapped in the press of bodies. No guards. No shields. And my hands were empty. There was nothing I could—

Refusing the call of death, I snatched the first thing that came to hand—a prayer board from a screaming protestor—and thrust it up over our heads. The arrowhead splintered the wood. My arms buckled, but still vibrating, the arrow stuck. For a few long seconds, my ragged breath was all the sound left in the sultry afternoon.

“They attacked our prince under a flag of peace!”

The shout came from behind us, and the leader of the blockade lifted his arms as though in surrender. “We didn’t! We wouldn’t! We only ask that His Majesty name his heir and—”

An arrow pierced his throat, throwing him back into the men behind him, men who lifted their prayer boards and their white flags, begging to be heard, but imperial guards advanced, swords drawn. One slashed the throat of a kneeling man, another cut down someone trying to run. A few of the protesting soldiers had swords and knives, but most were common folk who had come unarmed.

“Stop. Stop!” Tanaka shouted as blood sprayed from the neck of the closest man. “If I do not—”

“Back to your carriage!” General Ryoji gripped Tanaka’s arm. “Get out of here, now.”

“But they did not—”

“No, but you did.”

I followed as he dragged Tanaka away from the chaos and back to the cavalcade to be met with silent stares. Mama’s hand had retreated back inside her curtained palanquin, but His Majesty watched us pass. Our eyes met. He said not a word and made no gesture, but for an instant before doubt set in, I was sure he had smiled, a grim little smile of respect. Wishful thinking. No more.

Edo stood waiting at the door of the carriage and slid out of sight as Ryoji marched Tanaka up to it and thrust him inside. He held the door open for me to follow, and I took my seat, trembling from head to foot.

Still holding the door, the general leant in. “Do you have a death wish, boy?”

“I was the one trying to stop anyone getting killed, General, if you didn’t notice.”

“And painting a great big target on your back while you did it.”

“They loved me!”

General Ryoji snarled an animal's anger. "You think it was you they were cheering for? They weren't even seeing you. That was Katashi Otako standing before them once more."

"And I'm proud to look—"

"Your father was a traitor. A monster. He killed thousands of people. You—"

Words seemed to fail him and he slammed the door. A shout to the driver and the carriage lurched into motion. Tanaka scowled, ignoring Edo's concerned questions, while outside, more people willing to die for the Otako name bled their last upon the Shami Fields.

## Chapter 2

### Rah

It's harder to sever a head than people think. Perhaps if one were skilled with an axe, it could be done in a single blow—so long as the body was not trying to run away at the time—but out in the grasslands, decapitation is done with a knife. The first incision is easy. Then you drag your serrated blade through the flesh and think you'll soon be done. I thought so my first time. I thought it would be quick and simple and not involve such thick globs of blood.

But it is our way. The Levanti way. So though we grumble, we saw through still-warm flesh and long-dead flesh alike to free the soul within. Even when we are far from home.

“Why not just leave them?” Eska said, pacing behind me, every step a thud upon the track as though it had insulted his mother. “It will be night soon.”

Blood darkened one man's face like the ragged remains of a mask. It had burst from his eye and poured from his throat—a slash there having done half my job already.

“Come on, Rah, let's go. They were not worthy enemies.”

“All spirits are equal,” I said. “You should have remembered that before you gave the order to kill them.”

“Don't give me that whisperer shit. They attacked us.”

I stood, a sigh deflating my chest as I looked upon the poor dead



bastards. “We leave no soul behind,” I said. “Lok, Amun, Juta, cut ’em.”

Obligatory grumbling followed as the two men stepped forward, the boy between them.

“Juta is a not yet shorn, he—”

“Must learn.” I returned Eska’s scowl. “And opportunities to practice may be scarce.” I nodded to Juta, his long hair caught back in an untidy ponytail. “You know what to do.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“I’ll work beside you.”

Laughter filled the evening as the rest of our hunting party moved away from the slaughter, only Eska remaining to loom his disapproval over me. “We don’t know this land well enough to travel by night,” he said as I knelt in the dirt with the fallen. “Not without the aid of the Goddess Moon.”

“Our eyes will soon adjust to having only one moon in the sky.”

Eska grunted. “That makes it no less wrong. How can they stand so much darkness?”

I lifted a dead man’s head onto my knees and, using the slash in his throat as a place to start, began cutting. Blood dripped through the incision to stain the ground. Another thing you learnt early was to keep your knees apart.

Farther along the track, Amun was making quick work of his man, while Lok worked as slow and steady as ever. Juta’s face had screwed up in concentration.

“Kishava says it’s more than an hour’s walk back.”

I lodged my blade between vertebrae and regarded my second. His dark skin glowed in the last of the summer sunlight, but there was nothing bright about his expression. “If you think you can do this faster, then by all means take over.”

“I don’t think you should be bothering at all,” he said, the hushed words for me alone. “These are not our people.”

“No, but a soul is a soul, and that is why I am the captain and you are not. If you’re so concerned about our pace, then fetch a sack for the heads. Maybe two.”

Eying the others, he knelt at my side. “The sacks are all full,” he said, his lips almost to my ear. “Full of the meat we came out here to hunt.”

“I know. Move it around or leave some behind.”

“We need the food, Captain.”

“You think I don’t know that?” I said, twitching my knife free to slice the last cords of flesh in the dead man’s neck. “But what sort of Levanti would we be if we abandoned our honour the moment we stepped from our homeland?”

Leaning closer, Eska snarled, “This is the sort of thinking that got us here in the first place.”

“If you want to lead the Second Swords, then challenge me,” I said, locking my gaze to his—this man I had called friend long before either of us had sworn our lives to protect the herd.

In silence he chewed at nothing, drawing attention to a scar tracing the line of his jaw. A lucky escape from a stray axe blow the day we had lost Herd Master Sassanji to a Korune raid.

“No?” I shoved him away when he did not answer. “Then get a sack. You’ll carry it back to camp and the heads will be your responsibility until we find a temple.”

He got to his feet, all long-limbed grace. “Yes, Captain.” He pressed his fists together in salute, however brief, and walked away. His barked orders soon cut through the incessant buzz of insects and the complaints of a dozen Swords with nothing to do.

Beside me, Juta’s hands dripped blood, making the task twice as hard, while Amun had already finished and owned the look of someone who had been trying not to listen.

I rushed the rest of the job, making such a mess of the spine it looked like I had torn the damn head off. Watched by dead eyes, I spoke a prayer to Nassus under my breath. He might have preferred the One True God all the missionaries spoke of, but the Levanti god of death would have to do.

Wordlessly, Eska brought a bloodstained sack and I dropped the head in. Light was fading fast, darkening the forest in which we’d been hunting when the men attacked. The fools. I had tried to tell them we meant no harm, but they had understood our language as little as we understood theirs. The fight had lasted mere seconds yet had left me shaken. No Levanti returning from exile had ever described the locals as aggressive.

With the dregs in my water skin, I rinsed my hands and wiped them on the dead man’s sleeve. “All right, let’s go,” I said. “Before someone else comes looking for trouble. Kishava?”

The tracker swung a sack of deer flesh onto her shoulder. “We’ll have to move fast,” she said as the rest of the group gathered their share. “Night is coming.”

“Then we move fast.”

With a sack of heads slung over each shoulder, Eska strode into the trees in Kishava’s wake and I signalled for the rest to follow, Juta the last before I brought up the rear. Though he was not yet a Sword, he carried as much as the others. His scowl of concentration had not dissipated.

“Arm sore, boy?”

“Like I’ve been strung up all day,” he said, pushing back a bloodied clump of hair that kept falling into his face. “Damn flies.” Juta swatted them away from his bloody burden, but they came right back.

With both my hands occupied, I could only shake off the swarming insects that leapt from my sweaty arm to my sweaty brow and onto the sodden back of my tunic.

“Did we really have to do that, Captain?” he asked as we followed the trail of Swords cutting a dark vein through the trees. “They weren’t warriors.”

“Was Matriarch Petra a warrior?”

“No.”

We walked on through the lengthening shadows. “Was her soul freed?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’ve answered your own question. In the eyes of Nassus, all souls are equal. To leave one trapped in its flesh would do great injury to the Creator.”

He nodded, lowering his gaze to the dry undergrowth. He had listened to the lesson, but it ought not have been mine to teach. I had learnt at the herd master’s feet as did all young Levanti of the Torin herd. Or had done before Herd Master Reez let the missionaries come. Had let them help. Let them stay. Let them talk.

Bitter heartache pierced my soul, and just for a moment, I wished it all undone, wished we were home beneath the baking sun taking kills back to the herd. But it could not be undone. And allowed the choice again, I would have given the same orders.



I cleaned my knife while food made its way around the camp on two dozen battered tin plates, thin as leaves. It had made sense to leave the other eighty plates behind, freeing up space for tools and supplies, but whenever a fight broke out over who got to eat next, I'd have given anything to have them all.

Beyond the reach of the firelight, Eska held his usual court, and though I was sure he watched me from the shadows, I did not look up. Beside me, Yitti, our healer, slowly ate his dinner.

"Not eating, Captain?" he said between mouthfuls of rice and mushrooms wrapped in seared meat.

"Not yet, I want to finish this first."

He chewed and watched me work. "If you clean that blade any more you'll wear it thin. You're worried. About the food supplies."

"That rice we bought at the port is almost gone," I said, thrusting my blade back into its sheath. "We need to keep moving. Everyone says there's mercenary work here."

The firelight bathed one side of his face, making grotesque shadows on the other as he picked something from his teeth. He took his time about it as he did about everything, Yitti a man who could mull over the simplest choice.

"Everyone? The Third Swords of the Ahn and the First Swords of the Bahmut said so five years ago, but Gideon never came back. Nor did any of his Swords."

His calm words cut deeper than Eska's anger. "You have a better idea?" I said, sounding like the child I had thought long left behind.

Still chewing slowly, Yitti shook his head. "No, Captain."

Leaving him to finish his meal and make his rounds, I followed my nose to where the saddleboys had built a cooking fire and a coal pit. Crouched over, none of them worked with the speed or skill of the herd cooks back home.

"Changed your mind about food, Captain?" Juta said, barely glancing up from his work. Sweat dripped from the ends of his hair and the tip of his nose to hiss upon the coals. Beside him, Iya, our only saddlegirl, was

pulling fresh meat from the bottom of a sack.

“Nah, I’ll wait and pick at what’s left over.”

“Wise.”

Himi appeared beside me, handing her plate to Juta and bumping me with her hip, though given her height, it was my thigh she hit. “Captain, fancy seeing you amongst the cooking coals.”

Having lumped some rice and meat onto the plate, Juta held it out.

“That’s all?” she said. “What happened to the mushrooms?”

“All gone.”

She scowled, but before she could snap, I said, “It’s hard learning how to cook for a hundred mouths when you’ve never had to do it before, Him. Let it go.”

She took the plate without thanks, made a poor salute with one fist pressed to her dinner, and walked back toward the main fire.

I released a long breath. “How are supplies?”

“This is the end of the meat from the last hunt,” Iya said, dropping a handful into the coals.

“But it should have lasted three days.”

“It didn’t.”

Juta pushed a sodden lock of hair behind his ear as Fessel, his young arms straining, poured fresh coals into the pit. Cooking shouldn’t have been their job—Swords didn’t do such things—but without a full herd, there was no one else to do it.

“We’re also running low on salt, Captain,” Juta said. “After we salt today’s meat it’ll be all but gone.”

I ran a hand over my eyes. “Fuck.”

“I could sure do with one,” he said, reminding me that back home, he would have been only a season or two away from being shorn and branded a man, but this was not the plains, and I needed a cook more than another warrior with a big stomach. If we managed to find work as mercenaries, then he might get the chance to join our ranks. If not, a disgruntled saddleboy would be the least of my worries.

“You and me both,” I said. “How far can we make it on today’s hunt?”

“Maybe four days if we ration,” Iya said, turning the sack inside out so she could peel the last of the meat from its waxed lining. “The horses would need more grazing though because there’s only two days of feed, maybe

two and a half. Orun will know.”

I turned to go, but Juta stood and gripped my arm. “The others have been talking about leaving,” he whispered, his blackened fingers digging into my sleeve. “They say we might not yet be Made, but we are meant to be training to be Swords not slaves.”

“They listen to you?” I whispered back, sure Iya was watching.

“Sometimes.”

“Then keep them here as long as you can. We are stronger together than apart and our fortunes will soon take a turn for the better. After we find a temple to see off the souls we carry.”

He shrugged to where slivers of meat hung drying on a rack. Underneath it, the two sacks of heads sat unopened. “That had better be soon, Captain. In this weather, they’re going to start to smell real bad.”

“We have natron?”

“Some.”

“Then salt them or we’ll attract the attention of every vulture in Chiltae.”



After the meal, Eska gathered the Hand, and the five of us sat around a dying fire while our Swords prepared for sleep. Kishava the tracker, Orun the horse master, and Yitti the healer, along with Eska and myself, together made a complete Hand with which the Swords were wielded. At least that was the idea. I had learnt early that it mattered not how fine the intent; it still had to be carried out by men.

“Well, Captain,” Eska said, planting himself cross-legged upon the dirt. “What fine plan are you brewing now?”

Bitter, angry men.

“We’ve been here two weeks,” I said, looking at the four firelit faces around me. “There’s been no sign of Gideon, and life without a herd has been—”

“Shit.” Eska glowered at the flames.

“I was going to say harder than we expected.”

Orun shrugged one shoulder, the other weighed down by his horse box.

“It is about how I expected it,” he said in the rasping tones of a man who has seen many summers. “There’s a reason why we travel in herds. Many hands make light work. We fight and hunt; others cook, weave, tan, and look after the foals. We can keep fighting and hunting, but no one is going to cook for us anymore.”

“Except the saddleboys.” Eska again, glancing to where Juta sat crouched before his pit of coals, Fessel a mere shadow as he hung the last of the salted meat.

“That isn’t their job any more than it’s ours,” I said. “But we can’t go back yet, so we have to find a way to go forward.”

“Very philosophical,” Eska sneered.

Kishava cleared her throat. “The captain’s right. We’re stuck out here for a full cycle of seasons, and that’s too long to sit and tear each other apart. We won’t find Gideon by staying here.”

Yitti rubbed the short pelt of his hair as though it helped him think. “Gideon might be dead. As First Sword of the Torin, three years is a long time to stay away by choice.”

“That’s what I have been saying all along,” Eska said. “He wouldn’t choose to stay here, and since he never came back, moving from here could be dangerous. We have water here, and animals. The scouts who’ve gone beyond the forest tell of only an endless stretch of lifeless rock.”

“There’s a city,” Orun said. “At least that’s what I think the girl was trying to say. One of the girls from that last village. I asked—” He made the shape of a pointed roof with his arms to show how he’d attempted communication. “She pointed south and said a bunch of nonsense, but I think it’s called Capital.”

“Capital?” I said. “Is it big?”

Again, that one-sided shrug. “She went like this—” He held his hands far apart. “But she might have just been in awe of my cock.”

Laughter broke some of the tension, Orun’s smile lopsided like his shrug.

“South then,” I said. “Perhaps Capital is on the Ribbon, which means water and food. We might even find someone who speaks our language, and we could ask after Gideon and get mercenary work.”

“Work?” I had braced for the outburst but still flinched when Eska rounded on me. “You want us to work? For money? Like the city folk back

home? If that's what you wanted, then you could have just kept your mouth shut and done what Herd Master Reez told you to."

"Damn it, Eska, I don't want to be here either, but could *you* have surrendered?"

He stood, his shadow towering over me. "If Herd Master Reez gave me an order, I would follow it, no matter what it was."

"Herd Master Reez has lost his mind!" I leapt to my feet. "He no longer listens to his own people."

Eska stepped closer, lowering his voice, though an audience was already gathering. "Then why didn't you challenge him?" he said. "Huh? Why didn't the great Captain Rah e'Torin stand up and speak before it came to this? I'll tell you why. Because the great captain is a coward. Because if you had challenged him and lost, you would have been exiled alone, but this way you got to keep your honour and drag us all along for company."

He spat, saliva hissing as it hit coals. "The only reason you were Captain Tallus's second in the first place was because his sister liked the taste of your cock. But I don't see any way that cock of yours can get us out of this mess, so perhaps it's time you stepped aside and let someone else make decisions."

"Like you?"

"Like me. If I had still been his second when he died, none of us would be here sucking water out of rocks and hacking the heads off savages." Eska's fingers closed around one of his sword hilts and withdrew the blade slowly. I did not flinch but stared back into his hatred, bitter satisfaction in the knowledge that a blade once drawn had to either taste blood or be thrown down, never to be picked up again.

Had we been home on the plains, a matriarch or patriarch would have stepped between us, would have done their best to cool tempers before the Torin lost a much-needed warrior to a poor cause, but there were no matriarchs here, no patriarchs, and no herd.

My hand found the smooth leather of a well-worn hilt as fire pumped through my veins. "If you had stood before the Korune and said nothing, you would have thrown honour to the dirt," I said. "You would have doomed every one of our souls to weigh heavy upon Mona's scales. Do you think we would have thanked you?"

"Scales. Honour. Gods. Fuck you and your old glory, Rah. Look around



and see the new world because whether you like it or not, things have changed. The cities are tightening their hold on our lands, and if we are going to survive as vassals, then—”

“Vassals?” The silence deepened, sucking away everything except the resilient crackle of the coals. “I would rather die than bend before the Korune. Or the Tempachi. Or anyone else who sought to take the plains from us.”

“Then die. It’s time the Second Swords had a new captain to lead them home.”

Talk erupted, but it was all noise beneath the hammering of my heart. “Well, Captain?” Eska lifted a challenging brow. “Will you fight me for leadership of the Second Swords?”

“Yes,” I said, though my heart cried a different answer. “I will not let you bring such shame to the Torin.”

I withdrew first one sword then the other from the dual scabbards at my hip, their weight in my hands gifting a vicious joy.

“This is stupid.” Yitti stepped between us, fulfilling the role of the absent matriarch. “There is trouble enough without this.”

“Stand aside, Yitti,” Eska said, drawing his second sword, a prayer to Nassus etched into its blade. “If anything happens to you, you’ll have trouble stitching yourself up.”

With a grimace, the healer ran a hand along his hair, then stepped aside, leaving a firelit Eska to fill my vision. Noise and movement surged as the Second Swords made space, dragging logs and saddlebags out of the way while shouting at others to hurry. More came, forming a circle in the firelight that pushed and shoved and muttered, while inside every mind another fight took place. Who did they want to follow? Who did they want to win?

Eska licked his lips. “Gods stand on my side,” he called to the night. “I would lead these Swords home and fight for the Torin, not against them, for the new world, not against it, because screaming and thrashing in the dark does not stop tomorrow from coming.”

I ought to have thought of my own words, but my mind whirled free, snatching at horrors. This might be the end, here on these strange rocky shores far from home. Better to die than be exiled alone, but I clung to life as I clung to the blades that had never let me down.

“Gods stand on my side,” I said, spewing the first words that came to mind. “Because whatever change is coming, we are still Levanti, we are riders and warriors and nomads, we are the Torin, and we do not give in.”

The words were inadequate, but no words could have voiced the ache in my heart. An ache that deepened as my childhood friend stepped forward, spinning first one sword and then the other, their etched blades glinting. No cheers. No cries. Every watching Sword stood silent, holding their breath.

Another step. Another spin. I held my ground, blades ready, waiting for him to come to me.

*I am a captain of the Torin. The gods are on my side. I am a captain of the Torin. The gods are on my side. I am a—*

Ash and embers flew into my face, and through the stinging cloud, Eska lunged. I ducked, but the tip of one blade bit my shoulder as a coal bit my face. I rose, hissing, and backed away. He followed. “Come on, Rah. Captain Tallus said you were better than me. Prove it.”

He swung high, but it was his second sword I caught and parried, and at the clang of steel on steel, all thought fled. Fuelled by rage, I pushed him back, blades ripping air. His nipped my side. Mine caught his arm. And on we circled, not breaking gaze. “*Intention is not in the blades,*” Captain Tallus had always said. “*It’s in the eyes.*”

Eska’s brows twitched and he lunged. I met his low thrust and, ducking beneath his guard, pierced his thigh with my other blade, uncorking a trickle of blood. He could have conceded but leapt like a sand cat. I overbalanced, and steel sliced my hip in a line of fire, cutting leather and skin. My desperate deflection of his second strike hit so hard that my blade escaped my slick grip, ripping his with it. Together they thudded into the dirt beyond the glowing remains of the fire.

Bent double, Eska laughed, one bloodied hand gripping his remaining sword, the other a wound on his side I couldn’t remember inflicting. “Yield!” I said, chest heaving and head thumping. “This is your last chance.”

He only laughed harder, the sound awful in the silence.

“Yield.”

“No.” He flung his remaining sword at my head and I dropped, rolling through hissing coals and filling the air with puffs of ash. I thrust my blade up blindly and my arm juddered, almost buckled. A grunt, and again Eska

laughed a soft, hissing laugh. “Fuck you, Rah,” he said, laughter breaking to a cough. “Fuck you.”

The etched prayers along my blade disappeared into his gut. “I’m sorry,” I managed, my lips sticky with the taste of blood.

Again that laugh. “I’m not.” Loose in one hand, he held his hunting knife. He jabbed it toward my throat. It ought to have killed me. We ought to have died together, but the proximity of death fuels one in ways nothing else can, and with a roar of pure fear, I heaved his weight up and rolled. Eska landed with a heavy thud upon what remained of the fire and started to sizzle, the stink of singed hair and leather filling the suddenly dark night.

Shouts. Hurrying steps. A hand slapped my cheek. “Captain? Captain! Damn it, someone bring a torch!”

Either the torch was lit at great speed or I faded out, for when next I opened my eyes it was to the glare of flaming pitch. A torch was jammed into the ground beside Yitti, whose rough hands upon my sliced-up chest elicited a strong desire for death.

I groaned.

“Not dead yet, Captain,” he said, “but I’ll have to stitch this up, so it’s not over yet either.”

“Eska?”

“Dead.”

Stupid question. Of course he was dead.

“Kishava is preparing to free his soul.”

“No.”

Gods only knew why I said it. The last thing I wanted to do that night was cut Eska’s head from his body, but to have someone else do it...

“No, Captain?”

“No.” I gritted my teeth as his needle pierced my skin without warning. “I’ll do it.”

“You’re in no state to do anything tonight.”

“Damn it, Yitti,” I said. “Sew me up and I’ll do it.”

He didn’t answer but called out to the others without missing a stitch. I closed my eyes then, trying to focus on the sounds around me, on voices and conversations, on the scuff of steps and the snort of horses troubled by the scent of blood. I gave an order for Orun to do the rounds and calm them as best he could—at least I think I did. Everything blurred with the pierce

and tug and burn of the needle and thread.

Once Yitti had sewn me up and cleaned my burns, he left me alone. The other Swords had long since returned to whatever entertainment they had been drawn from, though the relative quiet of the camp suggested many were sleeping. There was nothing I wanted to do more, but sleep would have to wait a while yet.

Yitti had left the torch, and in the circle of its flickering, crackling light lay Eska. Half-lidded, his eyes stared at nothing, and though the muscles in his face had sagged, his pride had not. Whether or not it was a trick of the light or of fatigue, the man seemed to smile mockingly up at me as I lifted his head, wriggling my knees in beneath his shoulders.

My hands shook, one cupping his skull, the other gripping my knife. His body had not yet cooled, not yet stiffened, and the first incision into the back of his neck let warm blood flow onto the ground.

“You fool,” I said, and though I tried to concentrate on slicing his skin, my gaze kept slipping back to his face. “You could have yielded.”

Despite his bloodless lips, I could almost imagine he smiled in the flickering light. “So could you,” he would have said. “But you were never going to, and neither was I. We have always been fools together.”

With a grunt of effort I hacked through his throat, the strength of the human body as fascinating as its frailty. Tears stung my eyes. It ought not to have been this way. We had been saddleboys together, both of an age that we had trained together, slept together, learnt together, and eaten together. Every Torin I thought of as family, but he had been closer than most.

“Do you remember that day we broke the herd master’s bowl?” I said, nicking the last of his skin and starting on the thick meaty flesh around his spine. “We shouldn’t have been in his tent. I don’t even remember why we were, making trouble no doubt, you were always good at that. I bumped the table and it fell and gods know I was so scared. I didn’t tell you that, didn’t tell you I was afraid they would throw me out and I would have to roam alone scavenging in the grasslands, but you must have known. I was too scared to even lie, but you—” I dug the tip of my knife into his sinews. “You blamed that dog that followed Aristas everywhere and they believed you because you could lie your way past Mona’s scales with that smile of yours.”

I couldn’t tell if I was laughing or crying, but tears blurred my vision as

I hacked through Eska's spine. It took longer than it ought with slippery, shaking hands, but soon he would get his chance to face Mona, a smile already upon his lips.

## Chapter 3

### Cassandra

The man's last breath sighed out between damp lips. It was a peaceful sound, graceful even, unlike the mess I had left. Protruding eyes. Blood. Saliva. Semen. Sweat glistening upon rolls of fat. He was still hard, but that was not unusual.

*Can we not look at that, Cassandra?*

Ah, *She* was back. I turned away, not for Her but because the dead flesh was beginning to sing its yearning call, a thing far more unnerving than blood or guts had ever been.

There hadn't been time earlier to do more than ascertain an escape route, but now at my leisure, I examined the bedroom. Corpse notwithstanding, it was luxurious, full of velvet and silk and tassels—always tassels—but no amount of gilt frames and furniture could make up for the smell.

*If you didn't fuck them first, the room wouldn't stink.*

“Shut up.”

I wiped my knife on an embroidered... thing that had been thrown over the back of a chair.

*That's probably worth a fortune. It looks Kisian.*

“Shut up.”

Of course, *She* wouldn't. *She* never did.

The window hung open, allowing a humid cloud of city-stink to do battle with the pungent odour of stale perfume, wine, and sex. Down in the

street, voices mingled. With the moon full all the night markets would be busy, packed with pushing and shoving people trying to reach the best food vendors. My stomach grumbled.

*Are we just going to hang around? I'd rather not get caught if it's all the same to you.*

I grunted and snatched up my belt, jamming my dagger back into its sheath. "It's not like the servants are going to burst in when he's occupied," I said, keeping my voice low as I strode to the man's dressing table—yet another gilded piece of furniture with a mirror big enough to reflect half the damn room. Its drawer slid out as though mounted on felt, displaying a neatly ordered selection of jewellery. So it wouldn't look as though anything had been stolen, I grabbed only a few small things. A pair of rings with big jewels, some ornate pins, and a medallion that bore the man's merchant arms because you never knew what might be useful.

While I dressed, I giggled and chatted to the corpse in case any nosy servants were listening, then donned my cloak and made for the door. The dim hallway was empty—of bodies though probably not of eyes. Servants made more money selling their masters' secrets than they were ever paid in a wage.

I met the first servant on the stairs, a young man who looked pointedly away and invoked the blessing of God. "Whorishness isn't contagious," I said as I passed, but the man only turned farther away. The growing fervour for old-fashioned values almost made the overlarge hood that hid my face unnecessary.

The young man scuttled off.

*He might be going to his master's room, She said. Run!*

"Time enough if he yells." I maintained my regal pace down the stairs. A knot of maids in the entrance hall scattered, one even hiding behind a gilded pillar. Pathetic. The lecherous old bastard had probably had each and every one of them, yet they still thought me diseased. Lucky for them I had removed him from existence.

*Yes, I'm sure their lives will be much better now they have no master to pay them.*

Two footmen opened the mansion's front doors, letting noise spill in from the street—the shouts of vendors at the grand market, the rhythmic clack of hooves on stone, and an ever-present chorus of laughter like

pealing bells. Whatever the season, the city of Genava never slept, and at the height of summer, it never even slowed. Though it was past midnight, carriages and sedan chairs clogged the street, while upon the sidewalk, a torchboy lit the way for a group of well-dressed merrymakers. Timing my steps so I could join the back of their group and disappear, I swept down the stairs.

But of course life could not allow me so elegant an escape plan. A sedan chair slowed to a halt at the bottom of the steps, and out stepped a man in a belted grey habit, a high cleric's full-length mask hiding his face from view. Two guards in grey tunics joined him, but though both glanced at me, neither reached for a weapon. The high cleric eyed me through the narrow slits of his mask. I held my breath, heart pounding as though I were back at the hospice beneath the baleful glare of Cleric Oldem, but the high cleric just nodded.

As he reached the still open doors, I sped down the last few steps to the sedan chair and pressed a coin into the head carrier's hand. "Timpany. And fast."

"Yes, ma'am."

The door closed behind me with a snap and the vehicle leapt forward, throwing me back onto the cushioned seat.

*Did you just steal a high cleric's sedan chair?*

"Of course not, they don't own things. They hire vehicles to pretend they're just like poor folk." Although it did smell like a priest, its general mustiness was overlaid with the scent of freshly laundered cloth and floral oil. Cleric Oldem had smelled the same. "He knew who I was," I said, turning to look back through the window at the now empty stairs. "That nod was like a thank you, wasn't it?"

*Are you actually asking me something?*

"No, just thinking aloud." I had been paid handsomely for the job, but while that was all that mattered, a high cleric was the last person I wanted to help.

I gripped the leather loop hanging from the roof as the carriers picked up speed, winding through the traffic in a way that threw me against the side of my box prison. I gritted my teeth. That high cleric had definitely known who I was, or at least known my purpose, yet had not stopped me. Did he know he was walking in to find Lord Eritius's body? Would his cock have



deflated before the cleric arrived?

*You are disgusting.*

A small flask nestled in my heeled boot, and though I knew it to be empty I drew it out anyway, yanked the stopper, and tipped it up. A single drop landed on my tongue, gifting a thrill of relief, but it was not enough to shut Her up.

*That stuff is going to kill us, Cassandra. Please stop drinking it.*

Us. Had the flask been full I would have drained it in one go. Instead I pushed it back into my boot and stared out at the passing city, fretfully twisting the ties on my hood as flashes of light and noise sped by, the city all lit doorways and cloaked figures, flambeaus and lantern light glimmering off silk. The streets grew darker and narrower as we left Lord Eritius's mansion behind, but even in the deserted stretches I couldn't help turning to check no blessed guards followed. That little nod of thanks had lodged in my mind.

At last the sedan chair slowed before the Timpany Market's welcome plaza. Usually it owned only a few lounging drunks and dull-eyed whores, but tonight it was crammed edge to edge with people—not just the poor folk common to the area but citizens of all kinds, the genial blending of classes as unusual as the presence of so large a crowd.

Not waiting for the carriers to open the door, I shoved my way out shoulder first, my heeled boots meeting the stones with a squelch. In the posh areas of Genava, lords paid boys to sweep and shovel horse shit, but here those coins all went to food, shelter, and Stiff.

Before the head carrier picked up his pole again, I pressed another coin into his hand. "For your silence."

His chest heaved from the effort and sweat trickled down his face, but he nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

And that was it, because in Genava, everything could be bought or sold.  
*Especially you.*

It was an old argument, so rather than answer, I wound my way into the hushed crowd. They seemed to be waiting for something, people occasionally stretching up on the tips of their toes to see the other end of the plaza before murmuring to their companions. No one stopped me. No one spoke to me. No one even complained when I pushed through, and by the time I reached the market entrance, my curiosity was so piqued I climbed

the open iron gate for a better view. And there at the far end of the square, as though the men of god were following me everywhere tonight, half a dozen blessed guards stood on either side of a figure sitting on the stones. He wore the same mask as a high cleric, but no high cleric would ever sit in the dirt to bless commoners.

*That must be Dom Leo Villius, She said, adding Her voice to the whispers of the milling crowd as a woman held out her baby to the kneeling figure. I hear he's doing this most nights now. His father can't be happy about it.*

"You hear? How can you hear things I haven't?"

*Because you're not always paying attention. I like listening to other people; your thoughts get boring.*

After a minute with her head bowed, the woman with the baby rose with many little nods of thanks, and a young man in much finer clothes took her place.

*If the Nine want war, they'll have to get rid of him soon or risk him becoming too great a rallying point for peace.*

"The champion of the poor?"

*Something like that.*

The young man got up with the same silent professions of thanks, but though someone else took his place, Dom Leo Villius looked up. At me. There were only thin slits in his mask, but so sure was I, that my skin prickled and my heart sped as it had back on the steps of Lord Eritius's mansion. Heads started to turn, eyes hunting what had caught Dom Villius's attention, and I dropped from the gate, tugging at the hood already covering my face as though it would make a difference.

*He can't have seen us.*

*Us again, that hateful word, but I left it unchallenged as I hurried through the gates and into the busy Timpany Market. Almost immediately I began to vanish, evaporating into the mass of beggars and workers and other whores, the sound of a thousand living creatures swallowing me whole. Yet my skin prickled with the remembrance of that gaze, and with my heart racing, the half-dozen dead bodies nearby called out all the louder. Not with voices. Nor cries. Not a sound that could be made by any living creature. They called to me in purest desperation. But they were dead. Rotting. Finished. What could they possibly need now?*

What I needed was more Stiff. And fast.

Life brushed past on either side as I pushed through the clogged, narrow paths between stalls and buildings and makeshift tent slums. Unshaven men looking for a fight, women carrying squalling babies, children dressed in more dirt than clothing scampering through the throng clutching someone else's purse—the dregs of Genavan *society*.

Gergo sat at his usual stall, tucked into a corner between a makeshift shelter of old sheets and horse blankets, and another stall where a woman sat eyeing all who passed in silence.

“Ah, you,” he said in greeting, licking the last of something greasy off his fingers. Fingers that twisted in ways fingers ought not. “What have your keen eyes found in the gutter this time, my beauty?”

I pulled the handful of jewelled pins and rings from my cloak pocket and spilled them onto the worn leather mat in the centre of his table. Cheap trinkets and junk piled around it like mountains around a lake, and somehow he managed to knock nothing over as he descended, hawklike, an eyeglass already pinched between one wrinkled cheek and a spiky eyebrow.

“People lose such beautiful things in the street,” he said, picking each up and turning them over, even biting one between his teeth to test its strength. “It really is sad.”

“Very.” I glanced around to be sure no one had followed. From a distance, weak strains of music called to the living as the dead called to me. I tugged at the hood of my cloak and almost pulled out my flask again just to be sure.

*You need help, Cass.*

“Yes,” I said. “I do.”

*We don't mean the same thing.*

“What was that, my beauty?” Gergo looked up, one eye magnified by the glass.

“Just talking to myself since you're taking so long, old man.”

He chuckled. “If I was twenty years younger...”

“I'd still be too much for you, so be grateful you're not.”

Another laugh and he set down the pin. “All right then, my beauty, I'll give you six for each pin and nine for the rings.”

“Make it seven and twelve and we have a deal. The sapphire is worth double on its own.”

“Trust a whore to know her jewels. All right, my beauty, but only because you’re my best customer and you’re going to give half of it right back to me, eh?”

“Perhaps today I won’t,” I said.

He pulled out a locked box and, taking a key from around his neck, clicked it open. “Oh yes, you can waste your breath telling me you’ll shop around, but we both know there’s no better price and no place you can get it as... safely as you can get it from me.”

*Don’t do it. Take the money and get us out of here.*

Us.

“Or as easily,” I said to Gergo. “Finding a better price would be a waste of a night better spent.”

“How much will it be then, my beauty? Your usual two quarts?”

“Make it four. No... six. I don’t know how long until I’ll be back. Business takes me away from Genava for a time.”

Another laugh stifled his surprise. “But how will I bear such lonely evenings without the hope of seeing you, my beauty?”

“I think you’ll manage.”

Once the price of six quarts of Stiff had been deducted from my sale, it took only a moment to count out the remaining coins—enough for a warm meal and a night’s lodging at Mama Hera’s and not much more. Gergo held them out and I snuck all but one into an inner pocket away from wandering hands. The last coin I left to fall, and while Gergo apologised profusely for such clumsiness, I knelt to reach under the tattered tablecloth. There sat six quarts in waxed jars. One slid neatly into each of my pockets and another I wriggled into my belt by sucking in my gut, but the rest I would have to carry beneath the fall of my cloak.

“It’s quite all right,” I said, straightening up with the coin pinched between my fingers. The jars bumped each other. “Many thanks, Gergo.”

“Anything for you, my beauty, anything for you.” He reached over the mountain of junk and I put my free hand into his, letting him kiss the back. The gesture never failed to amuse me. “Take care of yourself now, won’t you?” he said, letting go. “Don’t make old Gergo worry.”

“Never. I am quite capable of taking care of myself.”

Flashing him a smile, I slid back into the crowd. As one of many, I was invisible and Mama Hera’s was not far, but the weight and awkwardness of

the jars made it difficult to move with any grace. Instead I was like a walking wardrobe, all shoulders and lumbering steps, turning all too often to check if anyone followed.

Only the smell of spiced flatbread kept me from going straight home. At one stall, an old man and his son were working fast to keep up with demand, the son taking money and handing out food while the father cooked. He rolled out each ball of dough and whacked it on the grill, dusted it with spices and flipped it, only to begin the process again. One was nearly finished, but rather than line up, I squeezed between the other stalls, and with my sleeve over my hand, I snatched the bread from the old man's tongs.

"Hey!"

Jutting one hip out brought my dagger helpfully into view, and I smiled. "With my thanks, of course."

*You can't steal food!*

I groaned, but gripping the hot flatbread between my teeth, I grabbed some coins blindly from my inner pocket and dropped them on the grill plate. Ignoring the complaints that followed, I walked away.

"You are annoying," I said. "They would have let me go without paying and we could have kept the coins."

*But it's not right. We've been over this.*

"Yes, we have, and it's still boring."



Mama Hera opened the door to my insistent knocking, scowled, and stepped back for me to enter. "Any messages?" I said as she closed and bolted the door before plonking down behind her desk in the small back room.

"Only one from me. Money or out."

"I've got your money." I dropped the end of the flatbread onto the desk in front of her and began digging in my pocket.

"What's this?" She eyed the food like it was a dead animal.

"What does it look like?" I said, fingers hunting an elusive coin. "It's flatbread. But that bit didn't cook right through so it's all yours."

Surprise drained from her face, leaving her expression set in the much more familiar lines of annoyance. “Why thank you, I don’t mind if I don’t if it’s all the same to you.” She held out her hand, and I gave over all but a few of the coins Gergo had given me. Mama Hera counted them. “You’re still short for tonight.”

“Then I’ll make it up tomorrow. A girl needs to eat.”

“A girl needs to lie on her back and earn more money, and you’re hardly a girl anymore.”

Ignoring the barb, I said, “When this job is finished I’ll have enough to pay you for a whole year.”

Mama Hera grunted.

*We could have paid for at least a season on what Gergo gave you for the jewels.*

“You have a visitor,” Mama Hera said, tapping her quill on the open page of her famous ledger. A book in which no one ever wanted their name to appear, a book that could, in the right hands, ruin many careers.

“A visitor? Who?”

She shook her head. “Can’t say. I ought not to have warned you at all, so try to look surprised.”

Dark rings circled her eyes, but her flat expression gave nothing away. When I didn’t move toward the stairs, Mama Hera stopped tapping the quill, and a half smile turned up one corner of her mouth. “I don’t like you very much,” she said. “But you’re good, and I know a girl in trouble when I see one. I also know when a girl is carrying Stiff under her cloak, and the last thing I want is for that girl to drop it in shock and smash the foul stuff all over my floor.” Despite my gratitude, I cursed Mama Hera for her warning, for always taking such joy in increasing the ways I was beholden to her. She started tapping again. “You didn’t steal from Lord Eritius, did you?”

“Of course not.” My stomach twisted. “I’m a professional.”

The smile stayed. “I expect full payment next time or you’ll find all your jobs going to Sariah instead. I don’t give fourth, fifth, and sixth chances.”

I headed toward the stairs.

“And Cassandra?”

“Yes, Mama?”

“Play this right and you could set yourself up for life. You’re not getting

any younger. Your beauty is starting to fade.”

*That’s exactly what I’ve been saying for the last five years,* She grumbled as I climbed the stairs. *Already, less people look at us in the street than used to.*

“Shut up.”

I stopped on the first landing to hide the Stiff, but the creaking floorboards left me no time to do more than dump the jars under a small table and hope no one was watching.

Doors lined the upper passage. All belonged to other women and all were closed except one. Mine sat ajar, the weight of its spilling light seeming to make the passage yawn. A stab of fear spread my senses out, but there were no dead bodies in my room or anywhere else in the building, though from out in the street, two corpses called. One had been there for days; the other was new. I ought to have told Mama Hera, but the children at the hospice had called me a freak, a devil spawned from the dead, and I had learnt early never to trust, never to tell.

I pushed open the door. A man sat upon the single rickety chair in the corner, leaning close to the lamp as though to better read the book in his hands. My book, the only one I had taken when I left home. “An interesting read for an interesting woman.”

He looked up. The lamp lit half of his face to molten gold, but a more nondescript face I had never seen. It was dull, pale of brows and lashes, and owned neither features worthy of attention nor expression worthy of interest.

“Ah, Miss Marius at last.” The chair creaked as he rose to greet me. “Might I say you are even more beautiful than hearsay would have me believe. That is refreshing. Usually so many things fall short of my expectations.”

“How sad.”

“Isn’t it, though?” His eyes ran over me, assessing, enjoying. All men did upon meeting a whore, although I had grown used to it long before I had called it a job. He smiled. “Older than I expected, which is also refreshing, if not entirely alluring.”

I forced an over-friendly smile to my lips. “Who are you?”

“My name is not important.”

“Then what is it you want, Mr. Not-Important?”

“Someone dead.”

“Anyone? Do you count?”

His brows lifted. “You already wish to see me laid lifeless upon the floor?”

“I don’t like suspense, nor surprises, nor strange men without important names waiting for me in my room. You must have paid Mama Hera very well.”

“Not a copper.”

That made me pause, eyeing the man up and down. If he had not paid her, then his name must be very important, whatever he claimed to the contrary.

“What do you want?”

He took a step closer and halted in front of me. My room at Mama Hera’s had barely enough space for a narrow bed, a chair, and an old wardrobe for my work clothes—fine dresses for fine men—but small though the room was, he didn’t need to stand so close.

“I think I already said, Miss Marius. I want someone dead.”

I fought the urge to step back, disliking his impassive face so near my own. Close up, his eyes had a dead quality.

“Why not talk to Mama Hera? She deals with such things. It’s safer that way. For both of us.”

“No. This is the way I like to do business, Miss Marius. Face to face. Eye to eye. And before you ask, I have chosen you because you are already in a position to complete my request with the minimal amount of fuss. You have been contracted to kill a young man travelling under the assumed name of Lord Thorius, have you not?”

“I don’t discuss jobs with anyone but Mama Hera.”

Another thin smile. “Of course. However, I know Lord Eritius was to accompany this lord and provide him safe passage across the border into Kisia, and I know that you have just killed Lord Eritius so another can take his place. Another who will hire you into his service as a maid and make sure all is clear for you to end this young man’s life once you cross the border. No—” He held up a hand to halt my retort. “There is no need to speak. I know you are being paid well for your silence. Considering the magnitude of this task, I am sure the payment upon completion will be... considerable.”



I tried to not let any sign of ill ease show upon my face. The man was well informed and that meant an information leak somewhere I could not control.

*I told you to refuse the job, She said. I told you it sounded political and nasty.*

“And who is it that you wish me to kill?”

“A servant who goes by the name of Jonus, a young man you will find yourself working alongside on the journey across the border. I want his head.”

The man still had not stepped back and it was increasingly difficult to hold his gaze. “A servant? All this for a servant?”

“Even the smallest cog is important in the workings of a clock.”

I slid my gaze to the shadow-filled corner. The cries of the dead were getting louder the longer he stared at me. “And if I refuse? If I am being offered as much money as you say, then surely I don’t need to take your job as well. It would... complicate things.”

“I don’t think you will refuse. I am not offering money.”

My gaze snapped back to his dull features. “Oh? You’re going to threaten me? Or perhaps someone I care about? If you’ve found one of those, then you are to be congratulated.”

A gentle laugh shook his shoulders and at last he stepped back and began to stalk the room. “I did consider it,” he said. “But by all accounts you are as heartless as you are beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

“It is not a compliment.”

“It is when you’re talking to a whore who kills people on the side.”

“Perhaps. No, I will not try to force you with violence, instead I offer... the Witchdoctor.”

*No!*

“I know where you can find him.”

That he knew I had been hunting the Witchdoctor’s whereabouts was even more troubling than him knowing about the job.

“We try not to interfere,” the man went on, still slowly pacing. “But a man like that must be watched, must be locatable at all times. Should you complete the contract, you’ll be able to meet him.”

*Don’t do it!*

The Witchdoctor. To most he was nothing but a scary story told to children, a man who took people from their beds never to be seen again, who sewed pig heads onto dog bodies just to see what would happen. But no story needed to be outlawed, no myth condemned as an enemy of the One True God. He was real, and a man who could bring the dead back to life might be able to give me what I wanted most. Peace.

*Please, Cass, don't accept. Not for that. Please.*

She knew, of course, because nothing in my head was ever secret.

Freedom. Silence.

"You have a deal, Mr. Not-Important. I can kill this Jonus before we leave Geneva."

"No."

"No?"

He returned to stand before me. "As with the other, he needs to leave. He just cannot arrive. Best you kill them at the same time."

Complicated, but worth it for the chance at freedom and all the money I had already been promised. "Fine, they will die at the same time," I said. "Anything else?"

"No, Miss Marius, nothing else."

"Then tell me how I can contact you upon my return and get out of my room."

"You may find me merely by asking for me by name, and if you cannot discover my name, then you are not as good as I have been led to believe."

"I would rather just have your name now."

"There's no fun in that, Miss Marius. Ah, now look at that scowl. Just as I have heard rumours of your beauty I have heard as much of your temper. Given that so many who see you inevitably end up dead, I consider myself fortunate."

"There's still time. You haven't left yet."

"Again with this desire to kill me."

"I desire to kill many men. It's nothing personal."

He leant forward. "For someone whose business is the pleasure of men, that is very odd."

"I don't think so. You're just lucky Mama Hera doesn't like me to kill people for fun. She thinks it's untidy."

The man grinned, forming the most interesting expression his face had

managed so far. “People do not usually speak so to me. It makes me glad I did not tell you my name. Perhaps—” His fingers traced a line down my hip. “Perhaps when your job is finished, I might enjoy your company further. Assuming Mama Hera would not consider that... untidy.”

“Not so long as you pay.”

His grin broadened. “I don’t think I’ll need to pay.” His hand dropped and he stepped back, bowing as a servant might to his master. “Until we meet again, Miss Marius.”

## Chapter 4

### Miko

My arrow thudded into the outer ring of the target. Tanaka's followed, hitting the red centre hard enough to bury its head.

"Brother," I said without turning. "You have not missed once since we started. You ought to be more careful after what happened on the road."

"But no one is watching," he said, spinning to check the small courtyard. "So why not just do it properly?"

I lowered my bow. "There are always people watching. Six by my count."

"Two guards." He kept turning, so brazenly that I tightened my grip on my bow. "The smith. A maid. And... the arrow boy. Five. None of them important."

"Six," said General Ryoji from beside him, the dragon clasps of his imperial armour glinting in the morning sunlight. "Your sister is not only a better shot than you, Your Highness, she is wiser. At least sometimes," he added with a meaningful look.

"You don't count."

"I do count, Your Highness. Six." He gestured to the arrow boy, who proceeded to yank both arrows out of the target with an effort.

Tanaka ran a hand over his face but could not wipe away his frustration. "Don't you get sick of pretending, Miko?"

"Always."

I took a new arrow from the barrel where a dozen feathery tips reached for the sky. Years had made habit of the motion—choosing an arrow, nocking, drawing, loosing. Eyes on the target. Feet planted. Shoulders back. I had started with the weakest draw weight, used to train little boys, and worked up from there.

Again my arrow hit the outer ring, exactly where I had intended. It galled, it always did, but I swallowed my annoyance and drew another. Perhaps one day I would not have to care who was watching, nor worry they saw too much of my father's skill in my hands.

Tanaka once more hit the centre, flicking the general a challenging smile. "If people are watching, then I'll not risk having it said that my twin sister is better than me. Besides, it'll look suspicious if neither of us ever hit the red."

He always used the same excuse and smiled the same smile, but General Ryoji kept his arms folded, his lips a grim line. His expression did not lighten when Tanaka hit the outer ring with his next two arrows.

"General," he said as though galled by the man's scowl.

"Your Highness?"

"Fetch me a higher draw weight and let's see how I do."

"I don't think you are ready for that, Your Highness, and I know—"

"—that you have to do what I command, so you may as well do it without arguing."

General Ryoji bowed stiffly and headed for the armoury, his steps punctuated by the distant bang of the smith's hammer.

"Why did you do that?"

"Hush!" Tanaka gripped my arm, only to let it go, his eyes darting about the courtyard. "There's been another attack. Chiltaen soldiers crossed the border near Tirin's Gap yesterday but the ambassador is claiming it's just brigands making trouble."

His words struck me like a pail of icy water. "Who told you? What does His Majesty say?"

"That it's all the more reason why a treaty must be signed soon. He has sent for Cousin Bachita."

I lifted a hand to my mouth. "Where did you hear this?" I said through barely parted fingers. "Are you sure?"

"Lord Roi told me after His Majesty rode for Nasake this morning."

“And you’re sure?”

“It’s not official, but that’s what everyone is saying. I know you don’t like Roi, but—” He glanced at the arch through which General Ryoji had disappeared. “He’s been my most loyal supporter for years now. He knows what the Chiltaens are up to. And he told me Edo was called to see His Majesty after the meeting too.”

“What? Why?”

“I don’t know, since Mama insists I do this every morning.” He gestured to the targets.

“That at least is something I can be glad of. I’ve always loved hours with a bow best of all.”

“Not I. Mama should give up on me and just be grateful one of us takes after him.”

“Hush, Tana, Ryoji is coming back.”

Tanaka lowered his voice to a hiss. “Speaking of Mama, I don’t know where she stands on this, so be careful what you say.”

I grimaced and took another arrow from the barrel with a shaking hand. The fast thud of my heart made my aim unsteady, and when I loosed, the arrow dug into the middle ring instead of the centre.

“This one has a higher draw weight, Your Highness,” the general said as he returned, “but isn’t as weighty as many others. A good stepping stone perhaps.”

Tanaka took an arrow and nocked it to the new bow. “Let’s see how it does.” The string creaked as he lifted his aim high above the target.

“Tana—”

He loosed. A maid shrieked and cowered against the inner battlement as the arrow flew over her head. It hit a Ts’ai flag, pinning it to the wood, Tanaka’s arrow protruding from the eye of the emperor’s dragon.

The longer the maid stared at it the sicker I felt, and needing to do something, anything, to shift General Ryoji’s attention, I thrust my bow into his slack hand. “Perhaps I might be excused, General.” Catching the ties of my leather bracer between my teeth, I started working it loose.

“Princess Miko Ts’ai giving up already?” he said, and I winced inwardly at his use of the name Tanaka had just disrespected. “My men have had to set up targets indoors and have horses saddled amid storms for you. Are you sure you do not wish to show Prince Tanaka up a little more?”

“You’re lucky I like you, General,” Tanaka said, seemingly unconcerned though his cheeks were dark with colour. “Boy, fetch that arrow so my sister may show off before she goes.”

General Ryoji held out my bow, the hint of a beguiling smile clawing back some of his fading youth. It was the intensity of his stare, however, that stayed my escape, and I held out my arm for him to rebuckle my bracer. He tugged it tight with an efficient yank, the brief flash of a smile all too like thanks.

Yes, I thought, *make it look like it meant nothing. Like it was just a boy showing off.*

“Very well, General. Give me a challenge.”

As the arrow boy sped along the inner battlement, a pair of His Majesty’s councillors entered through the far arch. Both were too busy to look up at the pierced flag, but it was only a matter of time.

“Split one,” the general said, reminding me it was more important to preserve my brother’s reputation than my own invisibility.

I strode back to my mark and took an arrow from the open cask.

“He must announce it at the oath ceremony,” one of the councillors said, the pair of them keeping to the shade, for despite the early hour it was already uncomfortably warm. Above them the boy had reached the flag and was leaning over the railing, stretching toward the arrow.

“But that is a dangerous proposition here of all places,” the other councillor said. I wanted to hear more, but at any moment they could look up and see the arrow boy struggling to reach the shaft protruding from the dragon’s eye.

“First to split wins,” Tanaka said more loudly than he needed, taking his mark beside me as both councillors looked around.

“Prepare to lose then, Brother,” I returned, nocking the arrow to my string, my heart thudding so loud I could not focus. General Ryoji had insisted we train with distractions. “*Battles aren’t quiet,*” he had said. And: “*If you take that long to aim, you’ll be dead before you loose.*” But how could I aim at all with my attention caught to the arrow boy wriggling Tanaka’s traitorous arrow free?

I drew, but just as I loosed, someone coughed at my side and I turned with a shocked gasp. My mother’s head attendant stood waiting, her dark servant’s robe fluttering like a blackbird with ruffled feathers. The thud of

my arrow hitting the target resounded behind me and the two councillors laughed. Nilla's ever-present scowl deepened. "Her Majesty will see you now, Your Highness."

Always a command, never a request. The arrow boy had freed the offending arrow and was dashing back along the battlement, and the councillors were moving on, but it was dread I felt, not relief. I could not face Mama without talking to Tanaka first. "You may tell my mother I shall be with her the moment I am properly dressed."

The maid eyed my sweat-stained tunic with disfavour but shook her head. "She said you must come now, Your Highness."

For a servant, she had a very insistent manner—no doubt the reason Mother kept her. An empress could not go everywhere, but her maid could. And did. One of Mother's many pairs of eyes and ears.

I glanced back at the target. My arrow had caught the very edge of the hemp coil, its feathered tip sticking drunkenly toward the castle. I handed General Ryoji my bow. "Duty calls," I said. "Good luck splitting my arrow, Tana."

He laughed, his grin returning in a rare moment of boyishness. "I shall tell you all about my triumph later. In the usual place."

Unable to speak the words I wished to, I merely nodded.

"I shall take you to Her Majesty, Your Highness," Nilla said.

"Yes, of course you will, even though I know my way."

The maid pursed her lips and strode back toward the castle, leaving me to follow her through the open doors and into the bustling preparations for the oath ceremony. It was still days away, but with members of the northern nobility already arriving in the city, everything needed to be cleaned, from the screens to the floors to the stone dragons that looked down upon all who entered. Everywhere servants perched upon perilously high ladders, attempting to wipe a year of dust from the hanging lanterns—the ceremony all that ever brought Emperor Kin Ts'ai north to what had once been the Otako family's greatest stronghold.

People called Koi Castle impenetrable and its walls had never been breached, yet a pair of imperial guards still stood outside Mother's apartments.

"Your Majesty," one said, sliding Mother's door just enough to speak through. "Princess—"



“Send her in, and don’t let anyone disturb us.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Mother was standing before a long mirror in her dressing room. A crimson court robe hung from one maid’s hands, while another poured fresh water and laid out her combs. The Empress of Kisia was far less imposing dressed only in her thin under-robe, yet she had only to turn her eyes upon someone for them to quake in their sandals. She did so now, turning her head not with regal stiffness but like a snake snapping toward its prey.

“Miko,” she said, the room’s blue hangings making her eyes shine brighter. “I have important news. Sit down.”

Nilla set a small table upon the matting, tea bowls clinking. She bowed and, not waiting for me to accept my mother’s invitation, began pouring. Steam curled to freedom.

“Don’t stand staring,” Mother said. “Sit.”

I did so, stomach flip-flopping like a fish. The tea was too hot, but I cupped the bowl in my hands and let the steam caress my cheeks. “If this is about Tana hitting the flag, Your Majesty, I—”

“Hitting the flag?”

Perhaps the maid in the courtyard had not been one of her people after all. “The Ts’ai flag in the yard. He was showing off at training.”

A grim line cut across her face, but whatever darkness snagged her thoughts she shook free, sending her very un-Kisian blonde curls dancing. “Not about the flag.” She forced a smile. “About your marriage.”

“My marriage?”

“You cannot be surprised, Miko. You are of age. You have been bleeding for more than three summers.”

My cheeks reddened.

“I have kept you with me,” she went on, holding out her arms so Nilla could tidy the fall of her under-robe in preparation for the outer layer. “Waiting for the right alliance, and at last the time has come.”

I set my tea bowl down with unsteady hands. “Who?”

“Dom Leo Villius of Chiltæ, son of His Holiness the hieromonk.”

I caught a breath. There had been weeks of whispers because a peace treaty had only ever been signed over one thing—a marriage—but that she was so willing to accept His Majesty’s disposal of me, that she had acquiesced so easily...

“You have nothing to say? You do not approve the decision?”

“No, Your Majesty.”

She slid first one arm and then the other into the broad sleeves of her court robe, not taking her eyes off me. Those blue eyes could pierce flesh and thought alike, yet my heartache went unseen or uncared for and I wished she would look away. “No?” she said when I gave no explanation. “You have not met the young man. By all accounts he is kind and gentle, and I even have it on good authority that beneath the mask he has quite the pleasant face.”

“But I do not want to leave Kisia. I do not want to leave Tanaka.”

Mother’s eyes darted a warning look at the maids. “I understand, you love your brother, but marriage to further the interests of the empire is your duty. This marriage will seal a treaty that ensures ongoing peace, and what can be more in our interest than that?”

Practised, false words. I knew her too well to believe otherwise, knew too that no marriage could heal the enmity between Kisia and Chiltæ. The headdress Mother wore at court was proof of that. A crimson glory made to hide the golden hair beneath. Her own mother had worn something of the sort, and the peace her marriage delivered had worn off within a year.

I reached for my tea, hoping it would burn away my ill ease. It didn’t work. “Does His Majesty intend to inform the court of my upcoming marriage or just send me away in the dead of night?”

Another warning look. “What strange notions you take into your head, girl,” she said. “Your father would never let you go to Chiltæ without the proper ceremony.”

Father. She used the word casually, only I recognising it for the rarity it was. “And a procession of guards and gifts?” I said.

“Not needed. Dom Leo Villius is joining the ambassador here for the signing and shall escort you back himself, quite the honour. Your father is very pleased.”

Father again. Words for the watchful eyes and listening ears, the truth only ever to be whispered in rare moments of solitude.

Dregs had settled in the bottom of my cup, and I swirled them so I need not meet her gaze. But she had already turned back to the mirror and was remonstrating with Nilla for beginning to tie the wrong sash.

“Forgive me, Your Majesty,” Nilla said, bowing three times, her fingers

twisting the silk. “I will fetch the correct one.”

The dressing room door opened and closed upon its felt-lined track leaving me alone with my mother, this beautiful, fierce woman who embodied the Ts'ai dragon in a way the Soldier Emperor never had. She had been forced to rule from the shadows, to fight from the shadows, feared and derided in equal measure. Whore. Monster. Goddess. Empress Hana Ts'ai of Kisia, the last living Otako of the old blood.

Except for us.

Mother came close and gripped my wrist, her diminutive form looming over the tea table. “Miko,” she hissed. “Thanks to that scene at Shami Fields, His Majesty is moving fast. Leo Villius is already on his way.”

“Already—” I closed my eyes a moment to squeeze back tears of frustration. Useless to say I did not want to marry him, that I did not wish to leave my homeland, to leave my brother, to leave her, to travel north over the border into the lands of the hated Chiltaens to be a faithful wife and mother and nothing more, because though I had never spoken the words to her, she knew.

“It is not what I wanted,” she went on, tightening her grip on my wrist and glancing at the door. “But sometimes we must make peace with the fate that befalls us. Your energies could be better spent making the most of this opportunity than in grieving a decision you cannot change.”

“You said you would never let—”

“I know what I said. And now I am saying that for your brother’s sake, you must seize the chance before you. There is no other way.” Her voice lowered to an urgent whisper. “Leo Villius is the only child of His Holiness the hieromonk, heir to a political power no priest in Kisia could ever dream of. But unlike his father, he shows no interest in politics and war and would hardly notice—might even prefer!—his wife to make and break his family’s alliances in his stead. Who better than you to make use of such an opportunity?”

The picture she painted was appealing. The possibility of a different sort of freedom, a different sort of power, and yet things were already in motion she knew nothing about and I forced the image from my head. I would not abandon the dearest wish of my heart to a second-best daydream. Not when it was so close.

“Just remember who you are,” she said, her voice husky and fierce.

“Remember your father’s fate. Remember you are my daughter. People will try to shunt you into the darkness, but you are an Otako.”

The door slid open and Mother straightened, letting my arm fall though white marks slashed my skin where her fingers had dug. Nilla entered, and I realised then she hadn’t even been confident speaking before her most loyal maid.

I got to my feet, my hands trembling. “I shall leave you now, Your Majesty.” I bowed to my mother as befit her rank. “I have much to think on.”

“You’re a smart girl, Miko. There are many things worse than marriage to a powerful young man.”

With a last bow, I stepped from Mother’s dressing room into her main apartment—a large room crammed with dozens of screens painted with strong-bodied pikes. It was the Otako family symbol, but their ugly jaws and protruding eyes looked out of place amid the water lilies and willow fronds. Mother had once told me she hated the pikes, but she had hoarded them here when His Majesty had cleared the castle of everything that might remind him of my father.

I found Tanaka and Edo in a cosy little gallery above the throne room. They sat side by side on the floor, heads close, their voices a low whisper and their hands all but touching. Heart already heavy with Mother’s news, I almost turned and went out again, but Shishi stood from her place of repose at their feet and padded across the floor to greet me, muzzle to my hand. I stroked her short white and tan fur, and she closed her eyes in canine bliss, tongue lolling out.

Their moment broken, Tanaka rose, his face flushed with annoyance. “Have you heard?” he demanded, coming across the floor and scratching Shishi’s other ear.

“Heard what?”

He had changed into a fine summer robe, and in my still-damp training garb, I felt like a weed beside an imperial rose. A tall weed, for only in the last few seasons had he caught up to what so many court ladies called my monstrously mannish stature. I knew it for spite, but all too often I felt like the ungainly giant they described to tittering friends.

A twist of sadness marred Edo’s welcoming smile. “I’m going home, Koko.”

“What?” I looked from him to Tanaka and saw no laughter in either’s eyes. “What do you mean you’re going home? This is your home.” It was untrue, but his father, Grace Bahain, had been out of favour at court so long that his son had become a permanent inmate of our prison. “Has your father made a deal with His Majesty?”

“I don’t know,” Edo said, “but he stopped paying his tithe because Emperor Kin ignored his requests for aid during the pirate raids. He wouldn’t change his stance now without good reason.”

Tanaka began to pace. “Why else would His Majesty let you go?”

“Perhaps there is no reason other than to get rid of him,” I said.

Both pairs of eyes turned to me. “Rid of me?”

“His Majesty has just made short work of sealing a marriage between me and Leo Villius of Chiltæ. No, listen, I know that makes you angry, Tana, but that is not the point. The point is that I am easy to send away. So is Edo. And you are easier prey if you’re alone.”

Tanaka snorted. “Let him try to kill me. Here of all places, here where they still speak my true father’s name with veneration. No, he will not dare.”

“But when the court returns to Mei’lian, you will be going alone,” Edo said, his grimace speaking a fear he dared not voice.

Down in the throne room the Crimson Throne sat empty, but Mother was taking her place upon the divan in her full court robes. It was rare she held court without His Majesty, but with new reports of attacks along the border coming in almost daily, the city was full of people demanding an audience with the emperor.

“I wish I knew what Mama was up to,” I said, watching as someone in an ocean blue robe bowed at the Humble Stone. “She says I must make peace with this marriage. That it will be the best thing for you, Tanaka, but... oh how I wish that whole thing at Shami Fields had not happened. That we had stayed in the carriage. I fear its consequences.”

“But why?” Tanaka said. “It showed how much of the north is still loyal to the Otako name. It proved that His Majesty is doing nothing about the Chiltæ attacks, that they are being allowed to run amok to punish all who aren’t loyal to the Ts’ai. He and Mama have waged their war against one another so long, neither of them even thinks of the empire anymore. We will do better.”

In the throne room, Mama was greeting a man with the shabby look of a claimant come to beg help. “If we make a move before the ceremony, His Majesty won’t be able to send Edo and I away,” I said without taking my eyes off her. “The Chiltaen ambassador—”

“You still think we should make that alliance? Didn’t you hear those men on the road? How many times have they stabbed us in the back? How many broken trade deals and promises? How many ships sunk along the Ribbon? Chiltaen pirates raid the Syan coast and the Nine don’t even condemn it, yet you think we should accept their help on this?”

“Not all of the Nine Oligarchs want war,” I said. “It is only the foundational faction led by the church. The ambassador is a pacifist. He says—”

“*He* says?” Tanaka folded his arms. “Miko, power isn’t won by letting other people use you for their own ends. Look, maybe all this works in our favour. If we strike now while the anti-Chiltaen sentiment is running high, we can use this marriage he is planning for you against him.”

“Tanaka, I—”

“It isn’t only Roi. Rasten and Kato have been itching to make a move. They detest having to bow and scrape while the Usurper sits on my throne.”

He began to pace, light dancing in his bright eyes.

I tried to ignore the anxiety writhing in my stomach as I watched him. “We have to be smarter than the emperor, Tana. Smarter even than Mother if we want this to work. I know you’re sick of sitting here and waiting, but do you trust me?”

“Of course I do,” he said. “But wars win hearts, Miko, not... not plotting in the shadows. A war with Chiltæ—”

“Let me see the ambassador,” I said, using the soothing voice that had always calmed him as a child. “Perhaps there is another route that has yet gone unseen. Grace Bahain may not have made an alliance with the emperor, and his arrival may change things.” Over Tanaka’s shoulder, I caught Edo’s grimace and fought not to mirror it. In truth, to lose Edo at such a time made my gut twist. “However we do it we will restore the Otako family to the Crimson Throne, and the pair of us will sit side by side and rule fairly. But we can’t do that if we’re dead.”

“And we can’t do that if we merely exchange one prison for another.”

I looked at Edo, seeking help. “Miko is right, Tana,” he said. “Allies are

allies. I will speak to my father as soon as he arrives.”

Tanaka ran a hand through dark hair pulled free of his messy topknot. “Miko meets with a Chiltaen ambassador and you with a duke. What am I supposed to do? Just sit here? I could embroider, perhaps, like all the other women left behind.” Edo stood and touched Tanaka’s arm, and like a leaking bellows my twin deflated, shoulders sagging. “Oh, just go, Miko,” he said. “I might trust you, but you wouldn’t even trust me with a needle and thread.”

The ill ease that had settled in my stomach seemed disinclined to leave. Or even to let me breathe a full, deep breath. I felt trapped in a room that was too small and stifled the urge to stretch my arms lest they hit invisible walls.

“You know that isn’t true. We are in this together, but I think this is the best way—the safest way—to get what we want now.” I stepped toward the door. “I had better go change before these clothes stick to me forever. And if I do not hurry, I will miss my chance to see the ambassador today.” I forced a smile at Tanaka, but neither he nor Edo answered and I left them as I had found them. Neither seemed to notice their arms were still touching. Or that Shishi and I were no longer in the room.



Ambassador Lucius Reedus of Chiltae always walked in the gardens after his midday meal. Ostensibly he did so for his health and liked to talk at length about his physician’s recommendations, but I suspected it had more to do with wanting a safe place where no one could overhear his conversations.

Despite the sticky summer heat, he was out in the garden as usual, and I let Shishi run ahead after an insistent smell. She darted along the row of flowers, their drooping heads dancing as she snuffled by, while ahead the ambling figure of the Chiltaen ambassador grew slowly larger.

Impatience clawed at me, but I forced my feet to go no faster and remain silent, showing no interest in the garden’s only other inhabitant. He showed as little interest in me, not once turning, though he must have heard me calling to Shishi when she tried to dash into the stone garden. A judicious

turn at the leaning willow cut some time from my dawdling hunt, and anyone watching would assume I had done so to get away from the ambassador, only to find myself forced into his company when the paths rejoined.

I made a reluctant bow as I met the pale-faced, pale-haired ambassador, dressed as ever in his flowing white mantle of state and bearing an over-effusive smile. This broadened at the sight of me, my bow met with one equally low and well performed, for this man had to stand with a foot in two worlds. “Your Highness,” he said, loud and joyfully. “And your guard dog.” He held out his hand to Shishi, and although she didn’t go to him, she wagged her tail. The man laughed. “There’s a good girl.”

“To which of us do you refer, Ambassador?” I said, falling into step beside him.

“A secret I shall keep to myself, Your Highness,” he said, winking outrageously.

“Perhaps that is as well.” I pursed my lips in my mother’s customary display of disapproval. “Since the watching eyes will remark if I spend more than a few minutes at your side, and I would not wish to waste them schooling you in how to show proper respect.”

He laughed his easy laugh. “Very good, Your Highness. There was something you wished to use your few minutes to say?”

“I understand you have drawn up a treaty to make my husband official.” I chose my words carefully. “This is not the marriage we discussed last time we walked together.”

“No, it is not,” he agreed, his smile too amused for my liking. “But as Prince Tanaka has yet to be confirmed as His Majesty’s heir, there is little yet to be done on that score.”

“But it will be done? I have heard mention of... another. All is still going as planned?”

“Your Highness, I am very good at upholding my side of bargains. I want this marriage to take place as much as you. Both of them, in fact, though your own is another matter. Peace is, after all, the wisest end to so many years of bloodshed.”

I shot him a warning look and kept from checking over my shoulder. Again he laughed. “There is a good reason I choose to walk after the midday meal, Your Highness.”



“So people always know where you’ll be.”

“Yes, but the timing is as significant as the act itself. Most of the court eat heavily at the midday meal and many nap afterwards. Those who don’t are consumed by such lethargy that eyes droop and minds dull. At this time of day, I am just a man walking in a garden in a vain attempt to keep the weight at bay, and you are just a young woman walking the grounds with your dog to stave off the feeling you are a prisoner in your own castle.”

I stiffened. “I know I am a prisoner, Ambassador. I am not in denial. I have known it all my life.”

“Yes, but no one else knows that you know. You are fortunate enough to be next to invisible.”

“But not to you, it seems.”

“I have met my share of intelligent women, Your Highness, enough to know what they look like. In this game, intelligent women are more than the occasional aberration so many think them. A curious state of affairs, that.”

We walked on in silence, the buzz of insects the only music to our progress, its tempo the crunch of my sandals on the stone path. Beyond the great maze of Koi Castle’s defences, the city would be getting on with yet another day of real life, a day full of noise, of roads choked with carts and horses and palanquins, of women carrying water from the wells and city guards striding in their gleaming pairs beneath strings of unlit lanterns and the overhanging eaves of old temples. Out there the crush of people was as varied as the garden’s flowers—a mix of coloured robes in silk and linen and worn-out wool, of knotted sashes and simple belts, of painted faces and warrior’s topknots and the flat hats of new scholars, their black robes clashing with the white of the itinerant priests in their brightly coloured wagons.

In the palace, no life existed beyond the court of watching eyes and whispering tongues and the ever-present figures of the Imperial Guard in their great crimson surcoats. General Ryoji’s men, officially, but like the court—like the whole empire—they were divided between supporters of the emperor and supporters of the empress. Ts’ai and Otako. South and north.

“Your brother is very much seen, however,” Ambassador Reedus said, breaking the silence upon which my thoughts had drifted. “He ought to be careful there. My allies would not be much pleased to lose the ah... object

of their interest.”

“I am sure the *object of your interest* has no desire to lose himself either.”

He stopped and bowed, acknowledging the hit with a wry smile. “If only you had been born a boy, Your Highness, we might have been having quite a different conversation.”

*And Edo might look at me the way he looks at Tanaka.* The thought darted into my head only to be banished with a clearing of my throat and a stiffening of my back. “I could fill the sea with ‘if only,’ Ambassador, but it has yet to help.”

“God helps those who help themselves, we are told.”

“Our gods seem to have very much the same idea. I shall leave you now, Ambassador.” I nodded at the path ahead, branching off back toward the main courtyard. “We have been seen together quite enough even for the dull of mind.”

The ambassador bowed again, managing to make his voluminous mantle appear graceful. “A very good day to you, Your Highness. May all our mutual ‘if onlys’ come true.”



It was late afternoon when I returned to my room, having lingered in the courtyard to brush Shishi and talk to the smith and see to a hundred other tiny things that could keep me away rather than face Tanaka’s frustration and Edo’s melancholy. I was too restless for either, my trepidation made all the worse by the castle’s silence. It seemed to hold its breath while Emperor Kin was away, though he had only gone to Nasake Shrine seeking a blessing before his oath.

Edo sat alone when I returned, perched on the window seat.

“Where’s Tanaka?”

He didn’t answer, just gazed out the window. His hands gripped fistfuls of silk.

“Edo?”

I touched his shoulder. Tears brimmed but did not fall, his pretty lips twisting into something like an apology he could not speak. “Gone.”

“Gone?” I gripped both his shoulders and forced him to look me in the eye. “What do you mean he’s gone?” My heart thumped hard, thinking of the ambassador’s words, of the emperor’s plans and all that blood spilled on kanashimi blossoms. “Riding? Do you mean he nagged the general to let him go out?”

Edo bit his lip and shook his head, only to nod a moment later. “Riding, yes, but General Ryoji doesn’t know. He... they...”

Realisation stole my breath. “He’s gone to—”

“Yes. I couldn’t stop him. He just laughed when I said he should wait, saying he would be a man not a child and...” Edo shrugged. “I’m sorry, Koko.”

I let my hands fall, suddenly aware of his closeness despite the million other thoughts speeding through my head. “How long ago did he leave? We could still stop him, perhaps, could still—” But once his absence was known, nothing could bring him back safe.

“How did he get out?”

“He wouldn’t tell me. He knew I’d tell you, but I think Lord Roi had a horse waiting and... I think he’s been planning it for a long time, Koko. This treaty and your marriage just gave him the excuse he needed.”

I held in the scream I wanted to roar. Mama would find out. Then the court would whisper. And when His Majesty returned, I would have to account for my twin’s absence. And all the while the eyes would watch and the people would talk, and Ambassador Reedus’s smile would turn to a scowl when he realised I was incapable of controlling Tanaka after all. And Edo would leave with his father just as everything came crashing down around my head.

When Tanaka got back, I was going to kill him.

## Chapter 5

### Rah

There is no greater feeling than riding at the head of a herd, no greater sound than the thunder of their hooves as you ride toward glory or battle or honour. Unless you're far from home and fast running out of supplies with a hundred ravenous stomachs to fill, a hundred horses to keep, and a sack of stinking heads awaiting delivery to the gods. Such things have a way of ruining even a canter through the dregs of a warm evening with loyal warriors at one's back.

The scouts had been right. Beyond the forest that hugged the coast lay nothing but screeds of shale and stone, a wasteland devoid of life. When evening fell we made camp, but the meagre supply of wood we gathered allowed for only a small cooking fire. While Juta rallied the saddleboys about their tasks and the Swords tended their horses, I gathered the Hand. Kishava, Orun, Yitti, and me. Until Eska was set free, I could not name a new second, that honour his until his soul ceased to Reside.

"I will check all the horses tonight before I sleep," Orun said, his face in darkness. "These stones are sharp and we don't want any going lame."

"Take one of the saddleboys with you," I said, shifting stones around my crossed legs in search of a more comfortable position. The rocks were so sharp that if it hadn't been traditional to sit, we would have met standing. "We cannot neglect their training just because we are stuck out here."

The big man nodded and looked to Kishava as though passing the

burden of speech. “There are no animals here worth hunting,” the tracker said, shrugging. “And no water. And when Hamatet and Amun rode on, they returned with news of more stone and nothing else.”

“And how much water do we have left?”

Yitti’s turn to shrug. “Half a day?”

“Half?”

“You can tell people to ration but that doesn’t mean they listen.”

Had I left enough in my own skin? Water was not abundant back home, but a herd always carried an extra supply. Children were given the job of leading a water wagon’s mules—a first test of responsibility. Eska and I had tried to make ours race.

“Then we have to push hard tomorrow and find water, or a settlement,” I said.

“Or turn back.”

They were just words, but spoken in Yitti’s slow voice they sounded like a challenge. He had brought me the natron salt for Eska’s head without comment. Had checked my wounds without comment. But the lack of comment had been comment enough.

“No, we go on. The Ribbon cannot be far. I shouldn’t have to remind everyone that the horses come first, but I will. Food and water for the horses even if it means we go without.”

“Of course,” Kishava said, and Orun nodded. Again, Yitti made no comment.

It was a subdued night, but the morning found none of us well-rested. Grumbling, we fed our horses, inked our brandings, gave thanks to the gods, and pressed on.

Herds only move at speed when in trouble because at a gallop, you cannot hear anything but the thunder of hooves, cannot smell anything but dust, and you cannot scout ahead. But we had no choice, and finally finding cause to be grateful we had no wagons or children to slow us down, I ordered the Second Swords to press hard from early morning. Trot. Canter. Walk. Repeat. Endless travel over endless stones.

Jinso’s sides were heaving when we stopped to rest, and I gave him almost all that was left of my water. Orun made sure the others did the same, and though my Swords had energy enough to complain, they were too parched to spit upon the cursed sea of stones.

“This place is worse than the high veldt,” Kishava said, sending a stone skittering along the ground with a kick. “Anyone who didn’t know how to navigate properly would get lost and die of thirst.”

“Good thing we have you then.”

I watched the others tend their horses and fight over what meagre shade a stack of boulders and a tiny copse of short, straggly trees provided. Kishava snorted. “It’s not easy,” she said. “None of this land is known to me and the air currents here are different. There is no Goddess Moon this far south and the stars are no help during the day.”

I hunted her worn features for the admission I feared. “We are going the right direction though?”

“Close enough. For now. But it’ll only get harder the farther south we go.”

Both Orun and Yitti were doing the rounds, Orun checking hooves and Yitti checking feet. They took care of other things too, but in a nomadic herd, nothing is more important than hooves and feet.

“We should keep moving,” Kishava said, watching the other members of the Hand about their work. With only a hundred riders it wouldn’t take long, but everyone was red-faced and the horses sweating.

“A few more minutes won’t hurt,” I said. “Capital isn’t going anywhere.”

Kishava’s fists rose in salute. “As you say, Captain.”

I stayed with Jinso and continued to watch. Captain Tallus had said it was the most important thing a captain could do. “*Let your Hand keep everything under control. You just have to watch to see what needs keeping under control.*” Such wisdom ought to have staved off dissent and challenge. Instead I had watched Eska right up to the point he drew his blade.

“Everyone is as well as can be expected,” Yitti said, no expression upon his long face as he approached, though his heavy-lidded eyes held their usual unspoken challenge. “But we need water.”

“Kishava thinks we’re close,” I said. “We will press on once all have caught their breath.”

Yitti looked up at the sky, shielding his eyes from the unmasked sun. “Good.” And without the customary salute he walked away. Trouble? It was hard to say. Yitti had always been more blunt than deferential.

We rode through the afternoon, Kishava out ahead with her eyes on the horizon—a horizon over which ever more stone came like an endless sea. We could survive perhaps another day before things got bad. The horses would fall first, or just give up and refuse to go any farther. Then the pack would fracture. Some would stay with their animals because we were horse folk and it was in our blood, while others would trudge away on foot across the wasteland. Many years ago, a herd had tried to cross the high veldt during the dry season. Only their bones had been found, man and horse together, each where they had fallen. Even the children.

It was hard to shake such thoughts beneath the hot sun, while responsibility rode close behind.

Finally, as evening began to close its hand upon the world, the ground changed. From rock and scree to stumpy shrubs, then grass that reached high enough to touch our feet as we rode. Hope rode with us then, speeding our gait until a settlement rose from the horizon, growing from stumps to houses as we approached.

There are no cities upon the Levanti Plain, no places where stone and brick and glass clump together. There are meeting places and groves, temples and trading grounds—places we stop to foal or sleep or worship but never to live. Before our relationships with the city states soured, their traders had told us of grand buildings and men in fine clothes, of ports and alleys and market squares so large they took half an hour to cross on foot. I had expected Capital to be like that, but though it was bigger than any city I had ever seen, it was smaller than my imagination. None of the grand walls and gatehouses the merchants had described, none of the flags and statues and squares, just a huddle of buildings like animals drawn to the same watering hole. And in the distance, the Ribbon sat like a haze upon the horizon.

In the scrubland outside the city sat a lonely well, the ground around it worn to dust by the passage of many feet. At sight of it, relief overtook fatigue, and even the most exhausted Second Swords laughed and joked as they set up camp and fought over every bucket of water that emerged from the depths of the world.

“All right, listen up!” I shouted, standing in the midst of their chaos. “We have water, now we need food and supplies. There’s nothing to hunt here, so I’m going to ride into the city. The more things we have to sell the

more money we get, and the more money we get the more food I can bring back. So bring out everything you've got that might be worth something to these people and put it in this sack."

I held it up amid a furore of complaints.

"I know!" I shouted to be heard over the top of them. "I know this isn't the way we are supposed to live, but we are Levanti. Whatever the plains throw at us, we endure, and whatever this forsaken place throws at us, we will endure a hundred-fold because we are Swords of the Torin." At last a cheer, and on its tide I soared. "So bring out your trinkets and your coins and tonight we will feast."

I dug a bronze figure from my saddlebag and threw it into the sack, along with a handful of Korune coins and a shell necklace that had belonged to my mother, hoping they would see the sacrifice and contribute. Each came forward with their own small treasures, receiving in return my blessing and my promise that we would get through this, that we would see out the year whatever it took and return, stronger, better, fiercer to fight the battles of our people. Necklaces, pins, lucky pearls, carved bones—Teppat even dropped a carved blackwood token in the sack, the one his grandfather would have used to vote at Gatherings when he had been herd master.

"You don't have to give that," I said when he lingered amid the chatter and noise of the growing camp.

"No," the young man agreed, scratching the branded skin upon the back of his head. "But it is no use to me here and probably won't be any good to me back home the way things are going. It's pretty and might as well buy us a fine meal."

"That it will, Teppat. You have your captain's thanks."

He saluted. "Captain."

When it was all done, I loaded Jinso with two sacks of goods and trinkets and three sacks of heads. He was not used to performing the tasks of pack mules, but though there was something of testiness in the shake of his mane, he resigned himself with a good enough grace.

"It will be dark in an hour," Juta said, squatting nearby like a long-legged ibis.

"I'm almost ready," I replied. "With luck I can be done and back before full dark. Although there's no horse surer-footed than my Jinso if the sun sinks on me." I patted my horse's rump. The gelding was a fine specimen,



but not fine enough for breeding stock, so upon being Made he had become my *ilonga*, or first horse, and while no Levanti would give him a second glance, no other could match him in my heart.

“You should prepare the cooking coals,” I said when Juta did not move.

“The others are doing it. I’m coming with you.”

I gave him a sidelong glance as I tightened the last knots. “Are you?”

“You’ll need a mule to bring back goods and someone to lead it.”

“I’m quite capable of dealing with a dull beast,” I said. “I was leading water mules before you were even born.”

“Really?”

I patted Jinso’s rump, assuring him we would get moving soon. “Probably. How old are you?”

“Almost sixteen.”

“Then yes, I was leading mules when you were squalling at your mother’s breast. Damn, that makes me feel old.”

“I’m still coming with you, Captain.”

It was not his place to make demands and I ought to have scowled him down, but his dark eyes twinkled merrily, and for a moment it might have been Gideon sitting there, young and confident like a god made mortal, exactly as I remembered him. I couldn’t help but grin. “You had better watch yourself, boy.”

Juta began retying his long hair with a leather band, strands running through his fingers like the years of his life they represented. “I’ll watch your back first, Captain,” he said, smile slipping. “No one wants me dead yet.”

Around us the Second Swords of the Torin went about their tasks. A few caught my gaze as they passed with nods and greetings of “Captain.”

Juta’s fingers were still busy with his hair when I looked back. “Explain yourself and you can come,” I said.

“Nothing to explain, Captain. I just...” He let his newly tightened ponytail drop down his back. “Something feels wrong and I don’t like it. Something about this place.”

“Colder. No Goddess Moon. All this dry stone. We aren’t at home anymore, Juta.”

“No. It’s something else, like...” He shook his head. “I can’t explain, Captain; all of this just feels as though I’ve seen it before, lived it before.”

Despite the warmth of the night, I shivered. “You can come, but you’re walking.”

Kishava approached through the lengthening shadows, her boots crunching on loose stones. “Find a map while you’re down there,” she said. “I’d rather not mess up my reputation by getting us lost.”

“But you’ll use a map?”

She punched my shoulder. “You’re damn right I’ll use a map here. What even are these stars? You make sure he doesn’t get distracted,” she added, jabbing a finger at Juta. “And—” Kishava gripped my shoulder, spinning me to face the city. Movement flickered. Figures were approaching. “About three dozen on foot,” she said. “Two on horseback.”

“A meeting party?”

It’s hard to hide a hundred warriors and their horses on flat, treeless ground, so of course they had seen us, but meeting herds usually keep their distance until they can be sure of a peaceful outcome. The plains were too harsh a home to make unnecessary conflict wise.

“I can’t tell,” she said. “They don’t look friendly, but they don’t look aggressive either. They’re just... marching.”

Word of the new arrivals spread through the camp, and soon all had gathered to watch as a shadow with the arms and legs of many men made its way up the slope. Hardly any sunlight remained to illuminate details, but as they drew closer, bows grew from each man’s back. And they did all appear to be men, men dressed in exactly the same clothing as each of their fellows—simple armour over green tunics. Even one of the riders wore the green, while the other wore a long robe that shimmered in the last of the light. It looked very fine. Much finer than their horses. Runts with short necks and low tails and an awkward trotting action—the sort of horses any Levanti herd would be ashamed to own.

Fascinated, I turned to see if Orun was seeing this and found him standing a few paces away with his arms folded. “The damn things are bow-legged,” he said. “Our mules could beat them in a race.”

Juta’s mouth had fallen open. “The woman’s mount is pig-eyed as well as goose-rumped.”

“Woman? That’s a fine robe but they’re both men, boy,” Kishava said. “Broad shoulders. No breasts. Bit of a giveaway.”

Juta’s face reddened as he met Kishava’s knowing eye. “A man in a

dress? The city states don't do that."

She shrugged. "Better than making the women wear dresses like they do."

Sniggering spread through the Swords, but I hushed them with a word as our visitors came within earshot. None of the villagers had understood our language, but I stepped forward to speak all the same.

"I am Captain Rah e'Torin, leader of the Second Swords of Torin," I said, looking from the armoured man upon the horse to the one in the robe, not sure which I ought to address. "We have been exiled from our homeland for a cycle and come to your lands in peace."

"I know." Neither of the riders had spoken; instead, a young man with sun-baked skin stepped forward, his long limbs having outgrown his clothes such that bony wrists and ankles were on full display.

"You're Levanti," I said, eyes only for him. "What herd?"

He saluted with closed fists pressed together. "I, too, am of the Torin, Captain, but you would remember me only as saddleboy to the First Swords."

"Then Gideon—?"

The armoured man upon the horse snapped something in Chiltaen, and the Levanti boy took a step back, eyes downcast.

"What is—?"

"I can say no more." He would not look at me. "I am sorry. Just do as they ask."

The armoured man nudged his horse a few steps closer and halted, staring down at us. A fire burned in the centre of our camp and the moon hung high, but neither was bright enough to allow sight of the man's expression.

This time when he spoke he was clearly talking to me, though I understood not a word.

"I don't like this," Kishava hissed from the corner of her mouth. She had altered her stance, subtly shifting her weight and her arms to make reaching her blades easier.

I had to agree and wished we were not so low on arrows and javelins.

When the man stopped talking, the Levanti boy spoke. "I am Commander Eno Brutus, Fist of the North. However you come to our land, you are invaders, and by our laws you must be destroyed—" Swords

scraped free of scabbards all around me, but the man didn't flinch. His archers, more than a dozen in a semicircle on either side, didn't flinch. Only the boy flinched as he went on speaking. "But in times of war such laws can be bent," he said. "If you fight for us rather than against us, then you and your men will be spared and may even have the opportunity to earn glory."

The young man had intoned these words much as his master had done, but as the speech came to an end, he added his own plea: "Just do it. Please."

"We cannot," I said as more swords drew around me. Though unarmed, Juta stood his ground. Kishava licked her lips, hand hovering. "We are horsekin of the Levanti Plain. We are Torin. We do not fight and die in the wars of others. It is against our code."

At a word from their commander, a single arrow loosed. We learnt early how to hunt, how to loose arrows at deer and catch rabbits in traps, how to ignore the squeals of dying animals and the meaty tearing of flesh when javelins were ripped out, but the sound of an arrow sinking deep into a horse's neck pierced our very souls.

A gelding staggered. Someone cried, though I could not tell who, only that Orun was there gripping its reins and trying to calm its panic. Another arrow pierced its rump, and in its pain it almost yanked Orun off his feet.

The Chiltaen spoke again, and almost immediately the young Levanti translated. "Unlike you I am well stocked with arrows," he said. "I suggest you change your mind."

"We do not fight the battles of others," I spat. "We come in peace. We —"

An arrow drove deep into the eye of Kishava's grey gelding. He staggered a drunken moment before collapsing, his weight shaking the ground beneath our feet.

"The next horse will be yours, barbarian," said the young man, though the words were not his. "And then your men. Your women we'll keep alive for a time as they have other value."

Kishava had not moved, but I knew that look, knew she had already calculated the distance between herself and the enemy, her rage all the greater for knowing she would not make it. We outnumbered them, but a charge would cut our ranks by half before we reached them, and for what? If we killed these men, would more come?

And yet to agree was against our honour. Against our code. It would weigh our souls heavy on Mona's scales, and when death finally came there would be no salvation. She would banish us all to the darkness to be reborn no more.

I set a shaking hand to Jinso's neck.

"No, we—"

Kishava stepped forward. "I will fight for you."

"I will fight," came another voice.

"And me."

Others followed, the voices joining to a chorus only to fade away when no one was left to take up the call. And standing alone in the gathering darkness, my heart broke anew.

In translation the young Levanti said, "Well, Captain Barbarian?"

A few steps from the still-warm remains of her horse, Kishava glared at me. She had forced my hand, and in that moment, I hated her for it.

"We fight for you," I said, though every word stuck in my throat like thorns.

Commander Brutus smiled. "Good," the young Levanti translated. "Not as smart as some of the other barbarians we've come across, but you'll do. Throw down your weapons. We don't want any... accidents."

"We would rather keep them," I said. "We have given you our pledge to fight, it would be against our honour to harm you."

He met the translation of this with a wave of his hand. "Yes, because once a sword is drawn it must taste blood and all that. You put down your weapons or we kill you; it is that simple, Captain Barbarian."

Though the words came to me in the boy's voice, I almost threw my sword at the Chiltaen commander to vent some of the anger swirling in my heart. But he was too far away and too well protected, and failure would only make my rage all the more impotent. Was this why Gideon had never returned?

It hurt to think of the First Swords of Torin being forced to fight for such men, of Gideon e'Torin, our herd's finest warrior and hunter, having to bow his head or die. No doubt he would rather have died unsullied by such dishonour, but all it had taken was one Sword who thought more of life than death and the decision had been out of my hands.

I could not look at Kishava for fear anger would engulf me. Shame

already burned my cheeks as under the watchful eyes of gods and mortals, I dropped my sword in the dust.

“Throw down your weapons,” I said, dropping my second blade. “All of them.”

“A wise choice,” the commander said as the thuds of blades hitting the ground rose like an evening chorus. “Round them up, boys.”

## Chapter 6

### Cassandra

Jonus grunted as he heaved the travelling case off the carriage, only to bite back a yowl as it landed on his foot.

“Even the smallest cog is important in the workings of the clock,” I muttered, watching from the inn’s upstairs window when I ought to have been cleaning the table in preparation for Lord Thorius’s meal. Whoever he really was, the young man seemed to enjoy throwing his pretend rank around, about as much as I would enjoy slicing his throat. As for Jonus...

*Jonus is a hardworking young man, said my eternal passenger. He’s a good person.*

“He’s a pretty idiot is what he is,” I said as Jonus struggled up the stairs under the heavy case and disappeared from view. “I’d have finished them both already, but our orders are to wait, so we wait.”

*Oh, it’s “we” now? Like I would ever do such a thing.*

I took the flask out of my boot and popped off the cap, freeing bitter fumes that made my mouth water. The liquid burned a trail from lips to throat, but the initial rush lasted only a few seconds before numbness set in.

*I wish you wouldn’t drink that stuff.*

“And I wish you’d shut up and leave me alone for good. We don’t all get what we want.”

Death called from out in the small town. Not the full chorus of Genova that cut into my head day and night, but ever-present all the same. I had

followed their song a few times, but all I'd found were bodies. Lifeless. Broken. Slow decay the only thing that silenced their cries.

Even if I couldn't get rid of Her, I would trade any number of lives to be free of the dead.

*But why do they want Jonus?*

They. Whoever they even were.

Footsteps approached along the hall, and I thrust the flask back into my boot, licking my lips. "Maybe we can find out." I bent over as though hard at work on the table.

The door opened and Lord Illus's tread entered. Lord Eritius's replacement. He had hired me as a servant, exactly as my client had told Mama Hera he would, but just how much he knew was unclear. If he knew my purpose, he had not let on. If he knew the identity of the false Lord Thorius, he had so far kept it to himself. There was nothing worse than a lack of information.

I bent a little lower, hoping the stitches I'd added would tighten the servant's gown across my hips and give him an invitation he couldn't refuse.

*Really? Him?*

"All clean, girl?"

"Yes, my lord," I said, my tone sweet and innocent though I could still taste Stiff on my lips. "All is ready."

"Good. Good." He closed the door and began to walk around the room, checking for dust upon the mantel, looking behind the curtains, and at last coming to check the steadiness of the chairs at the table. He stopped behind me. Better perhaps that I had turned, but then I'd have to look at his face.

He stroked my hip. "You've proved a good worker these few days," he said, his voice low and husky. "I will have to thank Secretary Aurus for bringing you to my attention. Though how he came to let you leave his service I will never understand."

Secretary Aurus. I was glad he could not see my face. Aurus was second tier, outranked only by the Oligarchs of the Nine. This was much bigger than I had expected.

Emboldened by my silence, the hand slid between my legs and his voice became huskier. "Perhaps he is not as appreciative as I am."

*Move, Cass. Make an excuse. Please. Just this once.*



He had already let information slip. It would have been easy enough to play the frightened filly and bolt, but *Her* objections never ceased to rile me. It was my body, after all; if She didn't like it She could go somewhere else.

"You're beautiful," Lord Illus said, leaning his weight against me so the edge of the table dug into my thighs. His other hand ran across my chest. "When you walked into my office, I thought a queen had come to visit me."

I rolled my eyes while I made an appropriate coo of modest delight and pressed my arse into his crotch. Inside my head, She started screaming.



A grape tumbled off the young man's plate and rolled across the table—the same table that had supported my half-naked body as Lord Illus chased away the voice in my head. He had told me to wipe it afterwards, but I hadn't. Young not-Lord Thorius pinched the runaway grape between thumb and forefinger and popped it in his mouth. He was eating alone, or at least as alone as someone pretending to be a lord was allowed to, which meant having Lord Illus, his steward, and two lower servants in attendance. Lord Illus was trying to keep his attention on the boy, but I kept shooting doe eyes at him to pass the time.

"Remus," not-Lord Thorius said, summoning his steward as he chewed the grape.

"Yes, my lord?"

"How many days is it until we cross the border?" He drummed his fingers upon the table.

"At the current pace we should make it to Tian in a week, my lord, and from there—"

The young man silenced him with a raised hand. "Let's move faster," he said, more assured than he had first appeared. Calm. Dull, even. "Don't send word ahead."

"Yes, my lord."

Worried? If not, he should be.

*Why do you take such joy in killing people?*

Ah, she was back. *Because it's fun*, I said, gracing Her with one of my

infrequent replies in thought. *Because once they're dead they can't talk anymore.*

*Can't hurt you anymore, you mean.* Memories spilled as though from an overstuffed cupboard. Cleric Oldem. The hospice. Jeering faces pressing close. Spit wetting my thin clothes. Mother had spat on me too. “A *curse from the demons*,” she had called me, every part of her seeming to twist up in hate. Aunt Elora had tried to stop her. Had pleaded for them to keep me, not send me away, and they had spat on her as well for bringing such disgrace to the family.

I blinked back a threatening tear, shocked by the strength of the emotion after so many years.

*I liked Aunt Elora,* She said.

*Shut up. She wasn't even your aunt.*

“Do you wish me to inform Ambassador Reedus?” Lord Illus was saying, the words dragging me back to the room.

“No, no one,” said young not-Lord Thorius. “Not even him.”

Ambassador Reedus. Secretary Aurus. So far I had stayed alive by not asking too many questions, but while I might be a pawn in this game, I didn't have to be a stupid pawn.

The young man glanced up at me. “Is she ours?”

“Yes, my lord,” Lord Illus said. “A good and trustworthy servant.”

Pale eyes lingered on me before the young man gave a sharp nod. “Order the carriages brought around early.”

“If Your Grace is sure—”

Lord Thorius cleared his throat, cutting Lord Illus off too late. Your Grace. In Chiltae, such a form of address was restricted to the heads of merchant houses and high-ranking clerics, the former all old men, and the latter even older men.

I stared at the young lord, all fair, unblemished skin and fine features, frail, almost birdlike, weak but for his pride and his pale, unblinking stare. He'd be dead soon, but with such powerful people in play, it was worth finding out who he really was before I slit his throat.



We travelled fast the following day, not stopping until the sun set. His Grace the Lord Not-Thorius ate alone, and while I served, I watched. While I cleaned, I watched. And when Lord Illus sent for me in the night, I listened for any slip of his tongue while he praised my beauty and lamented his fatigue and finally grunted his way to bliss. But I got nothing that night. Nor the night after, though we rose even earlier and arrived in darkness, the young man intent on pushing hard for the border.

*Perhaps you misheard,* She said the following night as I slid out of Lord Illus's bed, once more thinking through all the positions that would be eligible for the title of *grace*.

Lord Illus was not a bad lover, but if he wouldn't give me any more information, then spending an hour in his room each night was a waste of my time.

*Not going back gets my vote. He's disgusting.*

"You think all men are disgusting," I said in an under voice. "It's a wonder you complain so much when they end up dead."

The door to Lord Thorius's room opened and Jonus stepped out, freezing with his hand upon the handle as he spotted me in the dim light. His eyes widened like a captured animal. "The ah... His Lordship called for refreshments to be brought to his room," he said, reddening.

"I'm sure he did."

Jonus looked away. His ears burned. A duller, simpler fool could not be found, but perhaps this explained why I had been hired to bring in his head. Someone didn't like his... influence, although what real influence a handsome yet brainless young man could have, it was hard to say.

"Is there anything else his lordship requires?" I said. "Fresh sheets, perhaps?"

"No! No, nothing." He let go of the door, his other hand tucked behind his back. It would have been easy to grab his wrist and twist his secret free, but the success of the job was more important than my curiosity so I let him escape, cradling the hidden item to his chest as he all but ran away along the passage.

I followed at an easy pace, listening to his footfall as it thudded down the stairs, and was in time to see him slip inside the room where Lord Thorius stored his travelling cases.

Almost immediately, he re-emerged and I made my way down the stairs

as he walked up. He might have passed without a word, leaving nothing but a whiff of sweat in his wake, but as he drew level I said, “You could have told me you weren’t interested in women.”

He stopped a step above me, his pocket well positioned. Now to pick it while making conversa—

*I’ll talk to him.*

“It is not what it looks like,” Jonus said, his words and his flushed features suddenly distant. Handsome features, everything about him so good and so kind.

“Oh no, I didn’t mean to be rude and intrusive.” It was my voice, yet it sounded different and I never would have said those words. “I just meant that if you weren’t interested, you could have let me know because I...”

I thought myself a good actress, but the demure sweetness sounded all too real. An attempt to retch dramatically achieved nothing. *What did you do?* I said. *Why can’t I—?*

“But I am! I mean...” Jonus’s face twisted in an agony of awkwardness. “You’re very beautiful.”

“I think you’re beautiful too. You know... I mean, for a man...”

*Oh, for God’s sake.*

I clenched my fists and one closed tight. I couldn’t move my gaze from Jonus’s shy smile and my senses were dampened as though packed in wool, but the hand was mine. A bolt of panic lanced through me. How the fuck had She done it? How the—?

*Get the key,* She snapped.

*Oh, just like that? You steal my body and leave me with only a hand and expect me to just play along?*

*Do it, Cass!*

*I can’t pick a pocket without seeing where it is!*

A long, awkward silence stretched, then Jonus said, “You’re so much older than me that I didn’t think... I mean... you’re a bit...”

She looked down, her brief moment of confusion allowing me to take in every detail of his pocket.

*Step closer.*

“I’m sorry,” She said. “I know I can seem a bit... prickly. It’s just how I cope, you know? I hope you don’t think I’m too old.”

*I cope by drinking Stiff; prickly is all the world deserves. Now step*

*closer!*

She did, the rapid beating of her heart like a tattoo of distant drums. It sped as Jonus's hand touched my face and my hand found his pocket. My world became that hand, the key's cool metal all I could feel as I transferred it to my apron pouch. No attempt was made to stop me, no shout, no grab at my hand, and when I returned my attention to Her, it was to find my eyes closed and pressure upon my parted lips.

*No! No no no, I have to kill him not kiss him. Stop! I got the key.*

No reply, only a swirl of childish thoughts and the thunder of my heart.

*Give me my damn body back!*

She had one hand upon his chest and the other, still under my control, I thrust roughly between his legs and squeezed. Jonus yelped. His eyes bulged as all colour drained from his face.

"No!" She cried. "Let him go!"

*Get out!*

"No! Please!"

With a last twist, I let Jonus go and slapped my own cheek as hard as I could, making Her grasp the stair rail with Her other hand.

*Get. Out.*

"No! I—"

I slapped myself again and again, hardly feeling more than a faint sting.

"Cassan—dra—" She wailed between hits and staggered back. Her grip on the rail slipped and our feet found only the edge of the next step.

Pain poured in as breath was knocked out. I lay on my back, unable to breathe, unable to move as still more pains made themselves known. Back, arms, legs, face, neck—bruises from the stairs and my own self-assault. But it was me who couldn't breathe, me who hurt, me who coughed blood and spat it onto the floor.

*How could you do that?*

Distant voices murmured around me, and as I sucked small half-breaths, the innkeeper's wife appeared overhead. "Are you all right?" she said. "Did you fall?"

I managed a nod, and she gripped my arm to help me up.

*I just wanted to try it for myself.*

The innkeeper, dressed in his nightshirt and with his hair sticking up, stood before Jonus, who waved a hand and managed to say in a choked

voice that he was fine, thank you very much.

*I hate you.*

A dry laugh escaped my lips, made of relief as much as anything else.

“You must have knocked your head,” the innkeeper’s wife said, also in her nightgown, its loose fabric insufficient to contain so grand a bosom. “You’re delirious.”

“Yes.” My face ached so I said no more, just watched as the innkeeper helped Jonus up the stairs, the young man bent over, pale and trembling, pride surely all that moved him. By the time the innkeeper returned to his flustered wife, I had regained control of myself and refused all her offers of assistance.

“I shall catch my breath here a moment,” I said. “I don’t know how I came to be so foolish. I must have lost my footing and caught poor Jonus on the way down.”

The innkeeper chuckled. “He’ll be all right after he stops being sick.”

*Sick? Can you be any more of a monster?*

Yes, I snarled at Her while the innkeeper and his wife retreated to their rooms, leaving their lantern with me. *Yes, I can, because I’m going to kill him and take his head back to Genava.*

She screamed, her words little more than a string of raging nonsense that increased to a shrill screech as I pulled out the storeroom key. At least with Jonus recovering upstairs he was unlikely to notice it missing for a while, time enough to hunt through the false Lord Thorius’s belongings.

I slipped inside the storeroom with the innkeeper’s lantern and let out a long sigh. There were at least a dozen cases and chests, all of various sizes, but on top of the closest sat a small writing box. That was probably what Jonus had brought in. I snatched it up, yet all it contained were the usual things—paper, quills, ink, and wax. Nothing of interest.

I snapped it closed and set it back down.

In the meagre light, I opened the first chest to reveal a shimmering silk robe in the Kisian style—meaning it owned far more material than anyone needed to cover themselves even in the cold wilds of southern Kisia. But the Kisians liked things grand and showy. Even the sashes they wore tied about their robes were twice as long necessary. And the richer and higher ranked one was, the more fabric was wasted.

Trying not to disturb the neatly folded robe, I dug my hand down the

side feeling for something other than cloth. A second silk robe sat beneath the first, along with others in linen and wool. The next chest was similarly filled, but the robe on top was even finer and of pink silk with a multitude of tiny flowers picked out in white and red and even—shocking, considering the cost—purple. A box on top contained a necklace, its chain as thin as spider silk and its pendant the featureless Mask of God. My heart quickened. But Lord Thorius was too young to be a cleric.

I put the case back and moved on to another chest. There were more clothes and cases of plate and silver and incense. I had hoped for letters or scrolls or ledgers, but disappointment seemed my due.

An hour and more must have passed before I closed the last chest. The oil lantern had almost burned out and I yearned for my bed. Only a few hours remained before I would be woken to begin another day as a pretend servant to a pretend lord, but I bit my lip and went back to the chest with the necklace.

One last look. The jewellery case opened easily, leaving the failing light to glint upon the gold mask of the One True God. Real gold. And the workmanship was impressive. I turned it over.

### *Lady Miko Villius*

I turned it over and back as though expecting the words to change, but they did not, and their weight sunk into my tired brain with a thud that made me catch my breath.

Dropping the jewellery case, I snatched up the writing box and pulled off its lid. There the same fine paper, the same wax and quills and a tiny box of sand, but this time I tipped them all out and found a seal nestled beneath the paper. It bore the Mask of God with a simple V carved into the middle.

Dom Creos Villius, the hieromonk of Chiltae, head of the church, nothing before God. No one ever saw his face, but he had to be old, having held the position as long as I could remember. He had a son though. One son. Leo Villius. And Emperor Kin Ts'ai of Kisia had one daughter. Princess Miko.

“Damn,” I whispered to the empty storeroom as everything fell into

place. “This is not good.”

*I told you not to take the job.*

“Like I had a choice. I am a weapon to be employed, and a weapon doesn’t get far if it refuses to work.”

*You can’t mean you’ll still go ahead with it?* There was true shock in her tone. *He’s the son of the hieromonk! Without him there will be war for sure.*

I didn’t answer, just gritted my teeth and picked up the paper and quills to tidy them away. Better perhaps not to have known, not to have doubt scratching at my mind. Unlike his father, Dom Leo Villius cared for the poor and blessed the sick; he was a true servant of God and someone disliked it enough to want him dead. I could refuse to do it, but they would just send someone else and I would die standing up for nothing, unseen in the darkness. Because I was no one.

*No, Cassandra, not even you can—*

“I can and I will. If you don’t like it, get out.”



Jonus avoided me the following day as we took to the road at dawn, our carriage speeding behind the one that carried Lord Illus and Dom Leo Villius. Knowing his name, I had looked at him differently the next morning, noticed the way his eyes darted, his easy confidence and the pale, soft skin of a face so often covered by a mask. He must have felt my gaze, for once more I found those pale eyes upon me, his head tilted as though considering something I’d said.

I looked away, and by the time I looked back, he had stepped into his carriage and did not emerge again. Not even much later when the sun rode high and both our carriages halted on the side of the road.

“Why have we stopped?” asked Livias, the other maidservant, peering out at the sun-drenched fields.

I had no answer. There was no shade to afford the horses respite, nor water for them to drink, and when I stuck my head out the curtained window, I could see no settlement. No house. No farm. Not even a signpost. Nothing but fields of waving golden grass fading to dark green forest near the horizon.



Lord Illus stepped down onto the road. He caught sight of me and jerked his head, a scowling indication that I should pull my head in. Back inside the carriage, Livias said, “Well?”

“Nothing.”

“Perhaps one of the horses has thrown a shoe or a wheel has come loose. Or a case fell.”

“You’re probably right,” I said, not bothering to point out the vacant track or the lack of activity. I checked my knives with a touch to ankle, arm, and hip. There hadn’t been much time to alter the dress to my preferred specifications, but it would do in a fight if it came to that.

*So you haven’t figured it out yet?*

My head fell back with a sigh, but nothing could stop Her.

*Why would the son of the hieromonk be travelling to Kisia with a necklace bearing the name Lady Miko Villius if not to marry her and forge an alliance?*

I bit back another sigh and screwed up my eyes in a moment of theatrical pain.

*But why forge an alliance in secret when it’s the sort of marriage that ought to be an enormous state affair? And why sneak in under a false name? The only reason is because someone is expecting you.*

The possibility had already occurred to me, but expecting an assassin wasn’t the same as expecting *me*.

*The people who hired you want to be sure the peace comes to nothing, She persisted. They want war. Kill him once you’re across the border? It doesn’t take much to see that.*

*Which is why I had already figured that out,* I said. *He’s still going to die. War is good for business.*

*But this is Leo Villius. You’ve said yourself he’s the only decent person in all—*

A distant rumble crept through the lazy heat, and for the first time, Jonus uncurled himself from his corner to stare out the window. A growing cloud of dust billowed upon the horizon.

“What is that?” Livias’s words quivered.

“Horses,” Jonus said. “Lots of horses.”

“Are we under attack? Should we run?”

Jonus gave her a reassuring smile, ignoring me as he turned. “Not under

attack. Levanti. I've heard they have a camp in this area."

I peered from the window and once more checked my knives. Just in case. Outside, Lord Illus stood in the narrow slip of shade thrown by the front carriage and folded his arms. The dust haze approached and what had started as a stampede of distant ants soon became men on horseback, men with bronze skins dressed in leathers, their hair shorn to brown pelts like the sweating velvet of their horses' hides. Each carried a pair of swords, a serrated knife, and a complete lack of expression.

One came forward from the dust cloud, tall and graceful like his horse, all lithe muscle and quickness. Without letting go of his reins, he lifted his fists to Lord Illus as though in salute. "Gideon e'Torin," he said and, turning his animal with ease, indicated the men behind him, perhaps three or four dozen in all. "First Swords Torin will protect."

As he turned, a brown symbol showed plainly on the back of his head. I had heard stories—that they held down little boys and branded them as they did their horses, that they branded girls once they were married so they could not run away, that these men had been exiled for acts even too barbarous for barbarians—but although the skin looked rough like scar tissue, the colour smeared like paint.

"You're late," Lord Illus said. "You've kept us waiting."

"Now ready."

Lord Illus grumbled, and though I couldn't hear his words they were sure to be rude. "His Grace wants to keep moving," he said, heading back to his carriage. "And fast. So let's go."

"Go, yes. Fast, yes." The man who called himself Gideon e'Torin was all calm discipline, his every word a proud attempt at a language that didn't come naturally. After another salute to Lord Illus, he spoke to his men in fast, fluid, and surprisingly elegant gibberish.

"Those horses are enormous," Livias breathed. "How do they even get on them?"

"They're not short men."

The carriage started to move again, and like an honour guard, the Levanti fell in beside us as we continued our journey toward the border. As if the situation could get any more complicated.

Night had fallen by the time we halted before the gates of Tian. It had been the Kisian border town as long as I could remember, home to more

traders just passing through than locals, and, if the number of guards on duty was anything to go by, more soldiers than either.

Beneath the lights of the gatehouse, Lord Illus stepped down from the front carriage and engaged a pair of border guards in a flurry of conversation. Papers were handed over and then handed back. More conversation ensued. The guards gestured to the Levanti, then to our carriage, and my heart beat hard. It had been a long time since I had travelled into Kisia on business, a long time since I had needed to consider such things as papers.

The steward appeared at Lord Illus's side and did some more fast talking. Eventually a nod. More papers were exchanged. Stamped. The steward smiled, but the guards did not, the lanterns above their heads casting long shadows.

At last Lord Illus bowed, Kisian style, and climbed back into the front carriage. The steward remained as a small group of guards detached themselves from the shadows and strode along checking everything. Cases were opened. Wheels looked over. Even the Levanti had to sit still while any saddlebags they carried were poked and prodded. A guard pulled open the door of our carriage sending lantern light pouring in.

"Bags," the man said with the sort of ferocity usually reserved for barking at prisoners. Most of our luggage was on the roof, but Livias had a small bag she kept with her and thrust it toward him with shaking hands. Snatching it, he unbuttoned the flap and tipped it up, spilling some dried fruit, face powder, a pile of letters, and a small sewing kit onto the dusty carriage floor. The bag fell on top of its contents as the guard reached for the letters.

"Oh no, they are just—" Livias shrank beneath the guard's scowl.

He handed the letters to someone unseen behind him and pointed a finger at me. "You," he said. "Hold out your hands."

I did so, splaying my fingers to show I bore no criminal marks. Jonus did the same, and having cast a dark glare about the carriage, the guard slammed the door. In the darkness, Livias let out a trembling sigh.

The letters could not have contained a plot against the emperor, because after a few minutes the carriage began to move, leaving the grim stares of the border guards behind. Along the border many people were a blend of Kisian and Chiltaen blood, but the Rising Army was not allowed to be so

lax in its recruiting. Every soldier represented the empire so had to be of full Kisian blood to wear the emperor's dragon. Although the first time I had crossed the border it had been an Otako pike they wore with such pride.

Without further incident the carriages moved on into the town. In the corner, Jonus dozed off as though nothing had changed, but beyond the window everything looked wrong. The sounds were different, even the colours. Strings of paper lanterns hung over the road while curved roofs jutted eaves over narrow lanes, and everywhere the Ts'ai banner hung like a warning.

"It looks very beautiful," Livias whispered in awe. "That curly wooden carving stuff on the shutters—Why don't we have anything like that in Geneva?"

"Because the Kisians do it."

"Huh?" Movement said she'd turned to look at me, but I shrugged rather than turn away from the window. Out there, ordinary Kisians were finishing their day in the last of the fading light, music already emanating from every teahouse and whorehouse we passed. At every inn, I expected our carriage to halt, but although it had to slow for people in the street, we continued on until silk robes gave way to woollen tunics and stone to mud and straw. Then only darkness remained as we left Tian behind.

"I guess we aren't stopping," Livias said, settling back onto the seat. "Perhaps he is staying with a lord who lives outside the town."

I kept my pessimism to myself.

As we barrelled along the Willow Road toward the capital, shreds of moonlight fell upon our riders, upon their bare heads and their leathers and the pairs of curved blades on their hips. No doubt Leo Villius was carrying papers signed by the emperor himself, yet the ease with which the heavily armed barbarians had crossed the border surprised me. Perhaps it had been prearranged, Dom Villius thinking himself safer with men who could be bought rather than risk death at the hands of his own people.

Too bad for Dom Villius that no one ever looked at a maid.



I dozed the rest of the night and woke far from well-rested. No horses had

dropped dead between the shafts so we must have stopped for a change somewhere, but Dom Villius had chosen not to halt on the road for his own rest.

I licked dry lips. “Where are we?”

“On the road to Koi,” Jonus said.

“Koi?” I blinked away sleep. “That isn’t the capital.”

“No, but Emperor Kin is there renewing his oath to serve his people. He does it every year.”

“Really?” Livias said. “I didn’t realise he was so selfless.”

I snorted. “He’s an emperor. No matter what words come out of his mouth he is not selfless. It’s just a nice show.”

Neither replied, and I peered out at the passing landscape. Gone were the flat plains of southern Chiltae, replaced with rolling hills and the distant shape of steep, rocky ridges. Trees gathered close to the road, and though dawn spilled between their trunks, the morning grew darker as we plunged deeper into the forest. With the border passed, all I needed now was an opportunity.

*Or you could change your mind and let this peace go ahead.*

I folded my arms and prepared to argue.

Something thudded into the wall. Weak wood splintered around the sharp point of an arrowhead and Livias screamed. Outside, a squeal echoed her fear and a horse slammed into the side of the carriage, followed by its rider. A snap. A cry. The Levanti warrior fell amid the thunder of hooves and a storm of shouts. Livias whimpered as half a dozen corpses began their songs of temptation beyond the door.

“What’s going on?” Jonus said, pushing me from the window. “Who —?”

The carriage slowed then sped, jolting us from our seats as the coachman’s curses came loud to our ears.

More bodies began their songs.

“Kisians!” Jonus said. “They—”

Amid a gale of splinters and screams the carriage rolled. Caught in our cage, we rolled with it, every crash pummelling us with the force of a drunken sailor until, with a last thud, the carriage became a dim, dust-filled grave.

For a stunned moment the world contained nothing but Livias, impaled

and blood-drenched upon what had once been the carriage roof. The broken support had pierced her lower abdomen, but the deep slice that had carried away half her neck had probably killed her, leaving us a glimpse of bone amid torn flesh. And in death she called to me more than she had in life, singing the same yearning song as all the rest.

At the sight of Livias, Jonus retched and flung his weight against the broken wall, falling through into undergrowth choked with debris. Without even looking around, he doubled over, bile pouring from his mouth.

“Idiot,” I hissed, yanking a knife from my hip and another from my sleeve.

*Don't kill him!*

“Not until we're safe.” I climbed out of the ruins, eyes darting. “Get up,” I snapped at Jonus. Blood splattered his face, but by the way he moved it wasn't his.

I peered over the top of the carriage. One of its wheels spun slowly, and through it, death littered the road, crushed beneath the dance of horses. There were more crimson-sashed enemies than Levanti, but the barbarian warriors fought with a ferocity that cut their enemies down like so much wheat. It was impossible to tell whether superior strength or superior numbers would win, but either way, the Kisians looked to have taken care of Dom Villius for me. Like the eye of the storm, the other carriage sat in the centre of the road, pitched forward with dead animals between the shafts.

We needed to get out of here.

I ducked back to where Jonus had caught his breath. “Away from here seems the best plan,” I said.

“There are archers in the trees this side of the road.”

“Then we'll have to cross and hope to find somewhere to hide up that slope. Are you coming?”

He looked at my knives and nodded.

Flashing him a grin, I darted from the shield of our broken carriage and into the fray. It crashed over me like a symphony of destruction: thudding hooves and tortured cries, clashing steel and rending flesh rising over the ever-present song of the dead. An unhorsed Kisian came at me, and I ducked under his swing to slash the back of his leg. A sharp cry followed, but I didn't stop to see if he limped after me, only sped on into the chaos,

heart pounding. An opening appeared and I ran for it, only to be brought to a skidding halt as a great roan stallion cut across my path. A young man sat upon its back, his crimson surcoat at odds with a pair of bright blue eyes alight with the fire of battle. He shouted something and I spun back, ploughing into Jonus. Beside him, another Levanti fell from his saddle—no, *her* saddle. The woman slammed into the road, her bones cracking as surely as any man's would have done.

“You!” Lord Illus fought toward us, Dom Villius at his side, both covered in blood. Both were armed too, Illus with a blade and Dom Villius with a mace reminiscent of a cleric's staff. “You, help protect us.”

He knew what I was.

“We need to get off the road,” I said, pointing in the direction of the trees. “Cut us a path. I'll hold the rear.”

He snarled his determination and pressed on, catching the blade of a passing Kisian before hacking at the legs of another's horse. Dom Villius shoved past me. “Hey!” I said. “Stay close or you'll get yourself—fuck. Like I care!”

I followed, preparing to duck and slash the back of a Kisian soldier's knee, only to have Dom Villius crush the man's skull with a blow and move on without a second glance. He might sit in the dirt to bless the poor, but the God's child cut a path more expertly than the stiff figure of Lord Illus out in front. And when a blade swung from nowhere and ought to have sliced Dom Villius's throat, he had other ideas. The cleric sidestepped with the ease of someone who had seen it coming. He danced through the chaos like a man through raindrops, never getting wet. And in his wake, I could not be touched.

“Quick!” Lord Illus called, stopping to look back as he neared the road's edge. Dom Villius slowed, and through the melee a spear thrust toward the back of his neck. The young cleric ducked, and with the sickening crack of shattering ribs, it stuck in Lord Illus's chest. The God's child froze in a moment of shock, but I pushed him on as the call of death became one voice stronger.

From the ditch, a slope rose to rocky outcrops and dense clumps of trees. Dom Villius started up it, only to turn back as a shout rose in Levanti gibberish, its cry echoing as it spread through the remaining riders. “What are they—?”

The Levanti were retreating, but there was no time to question, only to shove Dom Villius in the back. “Run, go!” I said, heaving him up as he lost his footing in the dense undergrowth. “Go!”

In his wake I half ran, half climbed the steep slope choked with tangled greenery, listening for the sound of pursuit. But only Jonus scrambled after us, ripping through shrubs to catch up. He fell with a grunt and I glanced back, running blind. “Come on!”

The arrow came from nowhere, its force pitching him forward even as he pulled himself to his feet.

“No!” The word was wrenched from my lips but I had not spoken it. My feet skidded down the slope though I tried to stop them. “No! Jonus!”

*Run, you fool!* I screamed, panic filling my dulled senses as I tried to wrench back control. *He’s already dead. Run!*

But She didn’t run. Her gaze caught on his fallen body, and nothing else mattered as She jolted back down the slope. Jonus didn’t move. Didn’t cry out. Just lay face down in the greenery, blood staining his tunic. Hope burned hot like the summer sun, but even as She threw me onto my knees beside him, a sigh of death whispered past my ears. And Jonus too sang from beyond the veil.

“No no no!” She cried as She rolled him over, taking his pale face in Her hands. “You can’t, you—”

Everything snapped back into focus. The damp ground beneath my knees. Jonus’s heavy head in my hands. Shouts. Crashing steps.

I dropped his head and ran. The forest spun around me. Gasping and nauseous, I fell only to drag myself up with handfuls of fern fronds. Behind me, cries of horror pierced the gloom, and I risked a glance back. Jonus had hauled himself to his feet though the arrow still protruded from his back.

“That isn’t possible,” Dom Leo Villius said from his hiding place farther up the hill. It was a good spot in the lea of a large rock, but it wouldn’t keep him safe when the Kisians came in search of him. I ought to shank him and leave them the body, but I could not draw my gaze from Jonus. He had died. I had heard his song.

“How dare you seek to kill me,” the dead servant called, spreading his arms wide and lifting his voice to the canopy. “I am His Grace Dom Leo Villius of Chiltae, honoured servant of the One True God.”

The real Leo Villius drew a sharp breath behind me as Jonus’s body



started down the hill toward the approaching Kisians. “God breathed life into me, and it cannot be extinguished by any hand but his,” he went on, and two more arrows thudded into his chest. The close range threw him off balance, but he got back up.

“What is he?” Leo Villius breathed.

“I don’t know,” I said, “but he’s got their attention. We need to go.”

Keeping low, I ran up the slope and he followed, the pair of us scrambling toward the ridge. We reached the moss-carpeted outcrop out of breath but with no one in pursuit. Yet. Down the slope, Jonus stood unbending before the man with the fiery eyes, his whole body peppered with arrows like a pincushion.

*She* did not speak as Dom Villius crouched beside me in the undergrowth, nor did *She* speak when the Kisians grabbed Jonus and carried him away, still thrashing and declaring himself the child of God.

“I couldn’t save him,” I said, more for *Her* than for the young man at my side.

“No,” Dom Villius agreed. “But you have my thanks for saving me.”

Still nothing.

A grunt was all the answer I gave the God’s child. They had taken Jonus, but not all the Kisians had returned to their horses. Some were picking over the remains of the battle while others stood before the blue-eyed man, bowing at orders. A hand pointed up the hill toward us.

“You’re not safe yet,” I said as four Kisians started in our direction. “I guess they’re not satisfied with one corpse. If you want to keep breathing, we have to keep moving. Come on.”

My heart thudded against my ribs as our footsteps thudded the ground, but an eerie silence rang on in my head.

*Hello?* I said. *Are you there?*

## Chapter 7

### Miko

My arrow pierced the inner ring, completing another feathered circle. The target was beginning to look like a hedgehog. I drew another arrow from the barrel, nocked, and loosed, but missed the exact place I'd been aiming for.

"Out!" I shouted, and the arrow boy darted forward, worming his hands into the forest of shafts and feathers to yank out the right one.

He hadn't finished when I took yet another arrow and nocked it to the string. Captain Han grunted a warning. I pretended not to hear, and as soon as the boy stepped clear, the arrow thudded into the target, shaking it on its tripod.

"Out!"

"You are getting careless, Your Highness," the captain said in the low rumble of an old man used to saying what he thinks. "You need to stop."

"I will decide when it is time to stop, Captain," I said, taking a moment to wipe hands made slippery by a long afternoon in the hot sun. Only now had it almost set.

One day. One full day since Tanaka had left and still no word, no sign, nothing but a seemingly endless stream of questions. My mother had summoned me the previous evening. Then the chancellor. Then Mother again. Had the Imperial Council been in Koi rather than in Mei'lian running the empire, I would no doubt have been summoned to answer to both the minister of the left and the minister of the right, as well as all the

councillors who had His Majesty's ear. Only his continued absence had saved me from facing Emperor Kin himself.

I snatched another arrow from the barrel. Only four remained, and though Captain Han ought to have called for more, he had not. He stood patiently in the fading light with his hands clasped behind his back. The lack of breeze left his surcoat to hang heavy, hiding the sword at his waist and the dagger upon the other hip that all imperial guards carried.

My arrow thudded into the right place, and I let out a breath I hadn't meant to hold. Something else for which the captain would chide me. Without looking his way I took another. "More, Captain."

He sighed. "More it is, Your Highness. Would you like torches lit, too?"

"That would be wise," I said. "Unless you wish an arrow in your arm."

"Thoughtful of you to make it my arm, Your Highness."

The man shouted for more arrows as I sent the third-last sailing to meet its fellows. It stuck firmly into the hemp coils in the right spot, but I allowed myself no celebration, only grabbed the second-last and nocked it to the string.

"No more."

I didn't turn at the new voice, just let the arrow leap from my string and said, "I am almost out, General, as you can see."

The man appeared in the side of my vision, a shadow amid lengthening shadows. He gripped my drawing hand and stretched back my fingers. Calluses had long since toughened my hands, but as General Ryoji ran his own rough fingers over mine, I hissed involuntarily. "If you keep this up, you will have no fingers left, Your Highness. No more arrows."

I snatched my hand back. "Then I will reuse the ones I have."

"She has been at this all day, General," the captain said. "We have tried to dissuade her, but—"

"But it is not easy to move a stubborn ox. Thank you, Captain, you may go."

I took the last arrow from the barrel. "I could loose it at you instead, General."

"Yes, you could."

"Where have you been all day?"

General Ryoji's brows rose. "Doing my job, Your Highness. I oversee your training, yes, but it is not my primary function."

“No, your job is to protect His Majesty. But you did not go with him to Nasake. Why?”

“A lot of suddenly belligerent questions. Am I in trouble too, Your Highness?”

My cheeks reddened and I looked away, turning the moment of weakness into a hunt for watching eyes. Four guards and a maid, and the smith had grown silent as his apprentices closed up for the night. “Are you in trouble too?” I repeated. “I don’t know. Are you?”

“It is also my duty to protect His Majesty’s family. And upon this occasion, that was his command.”

“Because His Majesty doesn’t trust you.” The last arrow still hung between my fingers, nocked to the lowered bowstring. “Because it’s mother you serve.”

The general frowned, his face shadowed. “That is no small accusation, Your Highness.”

“Because its truth is of no small importance.”

“And its admission owns no small consequence.”

Silence hung for a time as we stared at each other over the empty arrow barrel. General Ryoji caved first. “If His Majesty didn’t trust me, then do you think I would still be the head of his Imperial Guard?”

“Yes. I would keep you. And have someone I trust more keep an eye on you. And someone else keep an eye on them.”

“Until you have every member of the Imperial Guard down to the errand boys reporting directly to the emperor?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t do it myself. I’d get someone else to do that so you thought I trusted you. Unless I didn’t want you to think I trusted you, at which point I would leave you behind and have someone like... Captain Lassel around to take over your role. He went, did he not?”

General Ryoji’s expression remained flat, though it seemed to take some effort, his muscles twitching. “At least you can be sure you were born to the right position, Your Highness,” he said. “You ought to have been a boy.”

“So I have been told many times, but if Tanaka is any example, boys are stupid.”

That drew a smile. “At a certain age, yes, they often are. Especially ones like Tanaka who have never been given the chance to spread their wings and fly. Where is he?”

The question came in the same mild tone as the rest, his eyes pinning me with a complete lack of deference. I could have called him on it, but though I might hate my lack of power, I was not blind to it. General Hade Ryoji was one of the few allies I had. Or thought I had. Doubt never strayed far. “I don’t know,” I said. “I have answered the same to everyone who asked and I have meant it every time. I do not know where my brother is or what he is doing or when he means to return, if ever. Perhaps he has seen a brighter future elsewhere and has run away.”

“That is not very like him.”

“No, but then you don’t know us well, do you?”

“Better than most.”

A distant gong sounded at the front gate, echoing its way up through the maze of castle defences to be reinforced by two more—all three repeating the same rhythm of short and long clangs rising over us like a storm.

The emperor was coming.

General Ryoji took the bow from my hand. “Best not to be seen here, Your Highness.”

“Why? Because Katashi Otako was not only my father but also an extraordinary archer?” I ought not to have spoken, but my prison had been closing in on me all day and I wanted to know how alone I really was.

The general rounded on me amid the clamour of the gongs. “When you cannot be careful what you know, you must be careful what you say, or you will end up like your brother. Katashi Otako was a traitor who burned Shimai to the ground with god-given fire—not a name to mention, let alone claim.”

“That is a ridiculous story and you know it,” I hissed. “Just as you know that the man sitting on the throne wants us dead.”

He stiffened like stone. “You are only half right, but I will talk about neither.”

“General,” I said in a hurried whisper as activity rose around us. “A storm is coming and if I am going to survive it then I need to know what I’m up against. I need to know who I can trust. If I am wrong in thinking you amongst their number, wrong in thinking you would protect me, then tell me so now. Tell me if I am to be torn apart.”

“The best protection is in taking care what you say and to whom. Allow me to escort you to your room now.”

His words were a slap and my fingers curled in mortification. “No, General, I will stay and greet *my father*, the emperor. But you are dismissed and may run away as it suits you.”

I strode toward the castle before he could answer, calling Shishi to heel as a small army of servants bearing welcome lanterns poured from the open doors. Those who noticed me amid the activity stopped and bowed, creating a wave effect of others halting mid-task to show respect. Despite my interruption, they formed two neat lines running all the way from the inner gates across the wide courtyard to the castle doors. Chancellor Nobu of Koi stood in the doorway, the last of the evening light gilding his greying hair. I went to stand with him, conscious of my sweat-stained training garb and the bracers about my wrists.

“Your Highness.” He greeted me with a bow precisely measured to be as deep as necessary and no lower.

“Chancellor.”

Hoofbeats sounded, heralding the arrival of the emperor’s procession. Many nobles travelled with an escort of armed guards so dense they could not be reached, but Emperor Kin Ts’ai of Kisia, the Soldier Emperor, the Commoner, the Usurper, rode at the fore, his great black stallion barely visible in the closing night. He held himself straight and proud like a soldier, a sword at his hip and a great crimson surcoat flowing from his shoulders, its silk home to a pride of Ts’ai dragons picked out in gold thread. But however grand he looked in the saddle, even the night could not hide his deformed features and his scars, or the slack fingers of his riding gloves where no flesh and bone existed to fill the inner void. Once, he might have been handsome—people said so—but no trace of it remained now.

Roku came to a halt with a scrape of hooves on stone and the servants all bowed as one, their lanterns dipping toward the ground.

“Welcome home, Your Majesty,” Chancellor Nobu said, not moving from the bottom step though he too bowed as deeply as his old, creaky back would allow. I did the same. At my side, Shishi sat, her tail stirring the step.

Without help, but equally without grace, Emperor Kin dismounted. Once on the ground, his ease deserted him, and though he remained stiff-backed and proud, his gait jolted unevenly as he came toward us. Past the row of bent-double servants without a glance, the tall, powerful guards in his wake

making him appear all the more broken. Only when he addressed the chancellor did his strong voice make a lie of his frail form. “I will dine alone,” he said, every word out of his mouth a command. “Bring all correspondence to my rooms immediately. Inform the empress I have returned. I will see her tomorrow.”

He took me in with a sweep of his single-eyed gaze and paid me as little heed as all the rest. Not a nod, not a smile, not so much as an inclination of his head. A lingering look was the best I received, and even that could have been imagined. Yet as he went past us into the castle, he drew off a riding glove and patted Shishi’s head with one gnarled, three-fingered hand, its skin puckered leather criss-crossed with scars. Then he was gone, only the scent of incense and sweat and horsehair lingering in his wake.



I ate alone, Shishi lying like a pale moss-covered log just inside the door. Edo was meeting his father and Tanaka was gone, leaving silence in this place that had once been full of our chatter and laughter, with wooden horses and wooden swords and ever-watchful eyes. Nurses, maids, tutors, guards—the emperor and Mama both too busy to take much interest in our day-to-day progress. Until summer came and it was time to be dressed in our finest and paraded before the court while His Majesty renewed his oath. Every year more people came to watch, to point and stare at Tanaka and whisper, their eyes darting from emperor to empress and their lips forming knowing smiles.

I fiddled with my food, too restless to take more than a few mouthfuls of black rice and a few sips of tea. It had been foolish to seek assurance from Ryoji, but it was done and could not be undone no matter how much I fretted and grimaced, more alone now than before, more exposed and vulnerable. Too often had General Ryoji’s name been whispered alongside my mother’s to doubt he had told her rather than Emperor Kin of my words, but the knowledge brought little comfort.

Only the protective presence of Shishi at my feet allowed me to eventually lie down and sleep. Yin shook me awake some time later, though it took a rub of heavy eyes to bring her into focus. “Your Highness,” she

said, still shaking me. “Your Highness, you must come now. Her Majesty demands your presence at once.”

“Why? What is going on?”

The maid shook her head, leaving loose hair sticking to her lips. “I don’t know, Your Highness, but I was sent to wake you.” She glanced at Shishi, alert but still. Had it been anyone but Yin I’d have woken to growling.

“Then you had best fetch a robe.”

Again Yin shook her head. “No time, Your Highness, I was specifically instructed to ensure you wasted not a moment. Here, I have your dressing robe.”

“I cannot see my mother in a dressing robe!”

Yin shook her head so hard it looked as though it might come off. “No time, Your Highness.”

Anxiety burned away my fatigue. “Is everything all right? Is it...? Is it Tanaka?”

“I do not know, Your Highness.” She fretted around in search of a sash for the dressing robe and crowed upon finding one. Her reed sandals scuffed softly back across the matting. “Come, Your Highness.”

“Yes, yes, I’m coming.”

I slipped the dressing robe on while Yin stuck a comb in my hair, then we were out in the passage where balls of flickering lantern light hung like fireflies. Whatever the cause of my summons the panic appeared self-contained, leaving the rest of the castle wrapped in silence. Only the imperial guards were about their duties—two at the entrance to the imperial wing and another pair outside Mama’s door, one of them Captain Han. He nodded to me, but not a word broke the silence, only the hush of the door sliding in its felt-lined track.

Mother’s sitting room was empty, but light bloomed through the paper panes of her sleeping room, and with insistent hand-waving her maids ushered me on. Another sliding door opened and Mama stared up at me from her sleeping mat. I had expected her to be alone and halted in the doorway, taking in a scene that made my stomach drop. Master Kenji knelt beside her, his white hair thinning like a mountaintop in early spring. One of his apprentices was mixing herbs, another tending a healing pyre already choked with incense, while the man himself had a line of needles piercing the length of my mother’s arm, each releasing a thin trickle of blood that



flowed like strands of crimson hair into the wide, flat bowl beneath. Mother lay propped upon a pile of embroidered cushions, her face pale.

“Give me a moment alone with my daughter,” she said, her voice lacking its usual strength.

“But, Your Majesty—”

“I can survive without you for the few minutes I wish to be granted, Master Kenji.”

The old physician quirked a smile and nodded at the needles. “Don’t touch them. I shall return in five minutes. No longer.”

“I will not steal your satisfaction by dying without you, old goat.”

One of the apprentices stared wide-eyed at his empress, before his master cuffed him over the head. All three men bowed and departed, closing the door behind them.

“Mama!” I said, moving forward. “You are sick? What is wrong?”

She sat up amid the smoke from the healing pyre, fair hair tumbling in curls around her shoulders. “What is wrong?” Her eyes flashed. “I am hearing rumours I do not like, Miko,” she said. “Rumours that put us all in very grave danger. Your loyalty to your brother is admirable, but if it is true he rode north and attacked Dom Leo Villius as he crossed the border, then you must tell me now.”

Blood drained from my face.

“I need no further answer, I suppose. You must work on your mask, Miko, your expressions give you away.”

“I do not know what he planned,” I said in a whisper, glancing back toward the doors. “But he did not want to wait for His Majesty to kill him or set him aside. He wanted to challenge here, where the Otako name carries weight. I begged him to wait, to be careful, but he would not listen.”

“So instead he will admit the truth and get us all killed.”

“Everyone already knows.”

“Knowing is a far cry from accepting,” she said, spitting the words like a hissing snake. “Did you ever think of that? Ever think how Kin might respond to the open threat of Katashi reborn?”

Her fierce words made me feel small and stupid, but rather than berate me further, she fell back upon the cushions, spent. “I ought to have given him an heir, however hateful it would have been. Too late now, far too late.” A little laugh trembled on her lips and the needles in her arm shook like

saplings in a storm. “And now my own children will bring to ruin everything I have worked for. How Darius would laugh.”

“What are you talking about, Mama? You said Tanaka might have to challenge His Majesty for the throne.” I lowered my words to a whisper as voices sounded out in the passage, accompanied by footsteps. “I did not want to use force, but if there was no other way, then how better to raise the Otako supporters to fight for him but to—”

“It was never Kisians who were going to fight for him!”

Her words caught me like a slap across the face. I stiffened, doused in sudden realisation of my own foolishness. A stupid, gangly girl who had thought she was playing the game. No wonder the ambassador had been so amused. “The Chiltaens.” Out in Mama’s sitting room, Master Kenji was telling someone that Her Majesty needed rest, but I could not draw my gaze from her, let alone my thoughts. “I thought you were just trying to make me accept His Majesty’s attempt to be rid of me after Shami Field, but... it was you who wanted me to marry Leo Villius. Was I the price for a Chiltaen army with which you could conquer Kisia?”

I pressed a shaking hand to my lips, unsure whether to laugh or cry. Mama sat up again, reaching out. “Miko, please listen—”

I shook my head. Numb. The voices outside grew louder. “I really must insist,” Master Kenji was saying. “One visitor is quite enough.”

“Miko, one day you will understand that nothing is ever quite how we want it to be. Sacrifices have to be made and hard decisions—”

The door slid. A servant in the emperor’s colours bowed upon the threshold, Master Kenji hovering with a scowl behind him. “Your Majesty, do please forgive the intrusion. His Majesty sends his best wishes for your swift recovery and insists that Princess Miko attend upon him at once.”

Mother had drawn a breath to order him out, to shout and rail and thunder, but she let it go and deflated into her cushions. Her sharp eyes pinned my skin, but I did not look at her, did not acknowledge the warning I knew she was desperate to convey. Instead, I bowed as one does to an empress and walked from the room.



Six imperial guards stood in the antechamber's dark corners and another two on either side of the throne room doors. None were my mother's men—no General Ryoji or Captain Han—just fierce-faced statues draped in crimson silk with their hands upon deadly curves of steel.

Acutely ashamed of being attired in only my dressing robe, I met none of their gazes and stood like a lost and frightened child before the great carved doors as they swung open.

Without daylight to spill crimson through the stained windows, the vast throne room was dark, its black floor melding with the night. A single lantern upon the dais cast flickering shadows, the one of the Emperor in his throne made vast upon the side wall. With a deep breath I strode in, the snap of my sandals echoing all the way to the Humble Stone where I knelt and bowed.

“Rise, girl,” he said, his voice echoing around the great, empty chamber. The single lantern lit one side of his scarred face, but though I stood waiting, he did not look at me. An Errant board was perched upon the arm of the throne, and he moved a piece with a muted click.

“I have never been good at sleeping.” He examined his pieces and those of his invisible opponent. “Many years ago I had a minister who would sit and play Errant with me through the night, but now I find I prefer to play alone. He always won anyway.”

He looked up then, and I met his hard stare. “Come, girl.” He beckoned me closer. “Sit with me.”

I had stood upon the dais only once. As children, Tanaka and I had crept into the throne room one cold winter day and found the red light hanging in the air like blood-soaked mist. I had been for turning back, but not Tanaka. He had not stopped at the Humble Stone either but had climbed onto the dais and settled himself on the hard, lacquered seat of the Crimson Throne.

If I had been scared then, I was petrified now, expecting a guard to grab my arm at every step and force me back. But they didn't. Not at the first step, nor the second, nor when I mounted the dais and came within arm's reach of His Imperial Majesty. When there I hesitated, he pointed to Mother's divan beside the throne, and taking care not to upset his Errant board, I lowered myself onto the stiff silk.

He moved a piece and once again surveyed the board, and for a long time we sat in silence while every possible reason for being summoned

whirled through my mind and sickened my stomach. Perhaps if I just sat quietly and showed respect, I would make it out of this in one piece.

At long last he turned his invisible opponent's king, ending the round, and brought his single, lashless eye to bear on me. The empty, puckered socket appeared to stare just as intently.

"You are not much like your mother," he said, the words laced with disappointment. "Nor your father. You are an altogether unusual creature, like some being formed from primal Otako ooze."

My cheeks reddened. "I have been called many things, but ooze may be the very worst of all." I had snapped the words before I could think better of them. So much for my plan to be quiet and deferential.

"It was not a complimentary word, was it?" A little laugh. "Though the imperial scholars assure me we all grew from swamp mud, so it seemed appropriate. Here—" Piece by piece he began to reset the Errant board upon the arm of the throne, his absent fingers making it a slow and painstaking process. I could not bring myself to help nor even speak, only to risk a glance at his face. "Play a round with me. You can be my old friend for the night."

He knocked a piece over with his sleeve, but I caught it before it could roll off the edge. He fixed me with a sharp, assessing gaze. "Very quick for ooze."

"If Your Majesty would excuse me, I do not think I am quite awake enough for a game of Errant."

"No? But I did not summon you from your bed. Your mother did that and in quite some haste. She takes odd ideas into her head at odd times." He waved his hand, seeming to dismiss everything Mother was with a shrug. "No doubt she wished you to know your brother has killed your future husband, though really I feel that could have waited until morning. What, I wonder, did she think you could do about it?"

"Lead," he added, gesturing to the board.

"But Your Majesty—"

"Lead," he snapped. "Isn't that what you want to do? Lead Kisia? Or are you just planning to help your brother take my place?"

I caught my breath, the enormous room silent as though our invisible audience held its breath with me.

"Your Majesty, I—"

He pointed to the board. “First lesson in battle is not to dither at the opening. Move a piece before your enemy moves it for you.”

I gripped an ornately carved cube, its top face black, its underside white, and slid it forward a space, immediately expecting a trap. There could be no trap yet with no other pieces deployed, but still my heart hammered hard and fear prickled my skin. How much did he already know?

Emperor Kin moved one of his own pieces, its top face white, onto the board. I moved another with barely a thought, the haze of old games and strategies coming back to me. Tanaka had never liked to play and our tutors had let me win every game. There were some things you didn’t do, and beating the princess at Errant was one of them. I envied Emperor Kin his old minister who’d had the temerity to beat him, not just once but many times.

“Do you have a plan, my dear?” he said when I made the first daring leap and turned one of his pieces, white to black.

“No,” I said, freedom in the admission. “To not make a fool of myself, perhaps?”

He laughed. It sounded genuine, though it was hard to tell if the smile reached his eyes with the skin so scarred. I knew the story. Everyone knew the story. Katashi Otako’s rage-fuelled fire had burned the city of Shimai, and the great Emperor Kin had fought alongside his soldiers and never been the same again. His missing eye had frightened me as a child, as had the shiny wrinkled skin that climbed up one side of his face, mutilating an ear and taking over where hair ought to have grown. What hair remained was gathered into half a greying topknot stuck with gold pins.

“If you worry too much about looking foolish, you will also dither and then fail. Let us call that lesson number two.”

Fear retreated somewhat at his fatherly tone, and I managed something of a smile. “I will attempt not to dither, Your Majesty.”

“Good. Lack of dither is your mother’s finest quality.”

A sneer? It was hard to tell without staring, and one did not stare at the Emperor of Kisia. I moved another piece, hunting now for patterns and lines I might use, but everywhere I looked I found ways he could best me—obvious defences and less obvious traps. It was meant to be easy to win a leading round.

I leapt two pieces, turning both, but neither showed the crown of his

hidden king. I could make for the corner gate, but...

“Ah, I see now,” Emperor Kin said suddenly as I bit my lip, eyes darting in search of a play. “Not just Otako ooze. You take after your grandfather.”

I looked up then, meeting his single, dark eye, though my heart sped to a frenetic beat. “My grandfather? You mean... Emperor Lan?”

“No, my dear, not him. For which you ought to be thankful. Tianto Otako—his brother. You never knew him, of course, but a much nicer man to liken you to, I assure you.”

Tianto Otako who had been Katashi’s father. Tianto Otako who had lost at Shami Fields. Tianto Otako had been executed for treason and here was I, a traitor, daughter of a traitor, granddaughter of a traitor, sitting on a divan at the emperor’s side.

“Your brow even furrows as his did when he was confused,” he said, and reaching around the board the emperor set his hand upon mine. “I know that you know,” he said. “I know that you know that I know. In fact, you would be hard-pressed to find a single person—peasant or lord—in all of Kisia who does not know. The heathens west of the Kuro Mountains probably know you are not my daughter and Tanaka is not my son. Not by blood, though formally you are both Ts’ai. That, my dear, is the core point around which you ought to have built your plan. Lesson three, find their weakness.”

He let go and moved a piece. “Your turn.”

My hands trembled, and I pressed them flat to my thighs in the hope he would not see. “I already said, I have no plan.”

“Ah yes, so you did. No plan but to not look foolish. I would have liked the opportunity to not look foolish, but your mother had other ideas.”

Hard words. Pained. I had to remind myself that he hated me, that he had wanted me dead, for something all too like pity scratched at my heart at such an admission. Emboldened by his honesty, I said, “You hate us, don’t you? And her, for giving you another man’s children.”

He laughed, a fragile sound that echoed only to stop as abruptly as it had begun. “The truth is a cruel weapon to use. Shall I loose it back at you? You hate being a pawn in a game that was none of your making. You hate the fragility of being a bastard, reliant on my continued acknowledgement and your mother’s ever-loyal supporters.” Emperor Kin smiled, and this time I was sure it did not reach his remaining eye, an eye that stared hard at me

like dark stone. “Lesson number four. Sometimes those who seek to help you are the worst enemies of all.”

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty,” I said, looking away. “I should not have said what I did. I did not think—”

“Lesson five, never beg forgiveness. Gods are never wrong. And to rule an empire you have to be a god. Some lesser man must take the blame for any and all mistakes.”

“Like my grandfather?” Again the words were out before I could stop them.

Emperor Kin’s brows snapped close. “Lesson six,” he growled. “Do not make assumptions about things you know nothing about. An emperor serves his people. The day the people serve the emperor is the day the empire falls. Remember that, Miko, if nothing else. War profits no peasant.”

“Neither does leaving those peasants to have their homes destroyed rather than fight to protect them,” I said, knowing it was unwise but desperate to move the subject away from my family. “Something has to be done.”

“You mean like signing a treaty? Or agreeing to a marriage between Dom Leo Villius, the only son of His Holiness the hieromonk, and my daughter, Princess Miko Ts’ai of Kisia? Ah yes, but he is dead and once more the world changes. Fragile alliances shift. Enemies move in, circling like wolves, pushing for their own ends, always pushing, until one day they push too far and—”

Emperor Kin tipped the Errant board, sending the pieces scattering to the floor like wooden rain.

“—it all comes crashing down, gods and all.”

I flinched as the board slammed into the floor.

“Unfortunately, the world doesn’t work the way you think it does. Call it your last lesson, Miko Ts’ai. The world does not wait. People do not wait. Nothing is fair. Some people fight all their lives only to die choking on a bean.”

“But the gods—”

“There are no gods. Only men. But if you can give people hope, then...” He spread his hands. “You can become something close to divine. But even that power will never save you from the bean. Goodnight, my dear.”

Stunned and numb, I rose from the divan, hands clenched upon shaking

fingers. I bowed, feeling over-tall and ungraceful doing so upon the dais.  
“Goodnight, Your Majesty.”

He said nothing more, neither then nor when my sandals met the shiny black floor with a snap. Alone, I strode through the darkness toward the doors, leaving the throne room empty but for him, sitting upon the Crimson Throne like a lone sentinel before a storm.



## Chapter 8

### Cassandra

I pulled the flask from my boot and tipped a mouthful of Stiff down my throat. Around me the forest twittered with life. Its vast canopy had kept the worst of the sun's glare from my skin, but after a day's walking, sweat covered me as completely as if it had been raining. I stank. The gash on my arm ached. And the mosquitoes that choked the humid air appeared to be attempting to nest in my flesh. Yet worse than all—the silence inside my head was brutal and my skin felt three sizes too small.

“Where are we going?” Dom Villius called as he came into sight of my resting place.

I shoved the flask back into my boot and got up. “Somewhere safe for now.”

“Safe for you? Or safe for me?”

“I'd have killed you already if I was going to today,” I said. “But by all means, find your own way if you're worried about sticking with me.”

I started walking again, punctuating every step with a litany of curses. It helped to fill the emptiness that even a mouthful of Stiff had not been able to dull. The woods were thick and tangled, and I snapped a whippy branch off some kind of evergreen as I passed.

“Those Kisians didn't even hear you coming.”

The four men left to mop up the mess. They had spread out to track us, but imperial crimson stands out amid green. Only one had even managed a

cry of fright.

“And you brought a dead body back to life.”

I stopped. The sun was sinking, sending golden rays cutting through the canopy—a glittering evening light in which tiny birds danced all too cheerfully.

Jonus had been dead. The arrow had hit him in the back—the first arrow. After that they had pierced him all over. But it hadn't been my feet that scurried down the hill. Not my hand that reached for him. Such hope She had carried, burning its pathetic need. Now silence hung where Her voice had always been—not peaceful silence, more like the scratching fingernail of something forgotten.

I walked on though I did not know where I was going.

“How did you—?”

“We should find somewhere to camp before the sun sets,” I said. “So we have time to forage for food.”

“Camp? Out here?”

Once more I stopped, and the God's child stopped behind me. “Yes, out here. Do you see a town around? A village? An inn?”

“No, but back on the road—”

“Back on the road is exactly where someone would look for you first. You want to keep living, then you need to stay out of sight for a while.”

His head tilted and his look became all too knowing for his young face. “You know who I am.”

“I know who you are. A dead man.”

An amused smile twitched his lips. “And you're my assassin.”

“No one looks at a maid.” I continued up the hill in search of a clear space, not caring if he followed. It would have been easier to slit his throat than talk to him. The completion of my contract relied upon his death, but my knife remained at my side. I needed time to think.

*She* might have praised me, encouraged such forbearance toward a poor young man frightened and far from home, but *She* wasn't there so *She* didn't, and I quickened my pace, leaving Dom Villius to keep up as best he could.

The slope flattened into a patchy ridge barely wide enough for a tent, which wasn't a problem since we didn't have one. The dense carpet of trees and undergrowth continued down the next slope into a gully where one

could say a stream ran if one was feeling generous.

“We’ll camp here.” I raised my voice to reach the young man bent double some way back down the hill. He lifted a hand in acknowledgement as he caught his breath. “I’ll hunt about for something to cook while you build a fire.”

He didn’t answer but once again lifted his hand, and I went in search of something to kill. I had never felt less hungry, but the urge to move, to do something, anything, was more overwhelming than the churning sickness in my gut.

A pair of rabbits later, I returned to the proclaimed campsite to find Dom Villius crouched beside a pile of sticks. There was no fire, but there was a lot of smoke. He coughed and tried to wave it away, but it came after him like a swarm of angry bees. While I watched, he tried to blow life into it, only to fall back coughing more.

“Is that called building a fire in the Citadel of Peace?” I said, dropping the rabbits at his feet.

“I’ve never had to build a fire before,” he snapped and sent the pile of smoking sticks tumbling with a kick of one fine boot.

“Don’t suppose you’ve skinned rabbits either? How about gathering water and leaves, can you do that? Berries? They don’t bite but they might stain your dainty fingers.”

He got up, pushing a lock of pale hair back from his face. “Really? You’re going to punish me because you’ve found you couldn’t kill me?”

I kicked the rest of the smoking mess out of the way to start the fire again. “It’s a brief twinge of conscience,” I said. “But it might not last if you don’t help. Water. Berries. Leaves.”

“What am I supposed to collect the water in?”

“Find something.”

“And why leaves?”

“I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to sleep on stones. Without bedrolls, a pile of leaves is the best we’re going to get.”

It was dark by the time we had the pitiful semblance of a campsite. Dom Leo Villius had collected water in shallow curls of bark. There was barely enough to quench my thirst, but once the rabbits were cooked, I could head down to the stream myself. Another thing to keep me busy. Already I was over-tending the fire, constantly poking and prodding it and the rabbits.

He settled away from the flames and the smoke, staring at the rabbits as they cooked.

“You had better do some talking,” I said, disliking the silence. God knew how I had wanted it, had yearned for it—silence, peace, normality, no urge to linger with the dead. Now that I had it, my whole body felt twitchy. Wrong. “Talk. Now.”

“Me? You’re the one who brought a corpse back to life. You’re the assassin hired to kill me.”

“Yes, hired by Chiltaens,” I said, ignoring the first part. “A Kisian ambush had nothing to do with me. Did your bride-to-be change her mind?”

“You know more than you ought.”

“On any other job, I would have said that was true. Ignorance is bliss when you kill for money, but not this time. Talk, or I might see my contract out after all.”

He shot me a disdainful look, and almost I liked him for it. “Are you going to keep holding the threat of death over me?”

I shrugged. “It usually works.”

“Yes, but I know you’re not going to do it, not while I might be of some use to you.” He ran a hand through pale hair made grey by the night. “As to Princess Miko having changed her mind, does it answer your question if I tell you that the man leading the ambush was her brother, Prince Tanaka Ts’ai? Whether or not he acted with his sister’s knowledge, or even his father’s, seems irrelevant at this point. I knew I was wanted dead on one side of the border, not on both. How shocked they would be to find they agree on something.”

“If the Kisians want you dead, then why not wait until you reached Koi? That’s where you were going, no?”

“You tell me,” he said. “Since you know so much.”

“I only know you were travelling under a false name and sped your pace to outrun the threat of assassination by your own people. But now almost every member of your retinue and your Levanti honour guard are dead and I have a suspicion I know who contracted me.”

*And I know that I ought to have killed you by now.* The thought echoed—a lone voice in a vaulted hall.

“Yes,” he said. “Secretary Aurus. At least he hired you first.”

When I said nothing he looked up, the glow of the flames licking his

face. “Surprised I know? Like you, I know too much. Mostly it’s a good thing, but sometimes I wish I could close my ears to the world.”

“I know the feeling.”

“Yes, I know that too.”

I snorted. “You have no idea. You don’t even know me.”

“I do. Your name is Cassandra Marius.” From across the fire, his pale eyes bored into mine. “You’re the daughter of an influential merchant, but the day they found your collection of dead children was the day they sent you to the hospice and never saw you again.”

His words bored as deep as his eyes. “How do you know that?” I said, hating the crack of emotion in my voice. “Who told you?”

“You were bought by a whore master at thirteen, and by the time you were nineteen you had already earned—”

“Stop.”

“Your first assassination was six years ago when one of your regular clients paid you to seduce and kill his father. Mama Hera came to you after that.”

I got up, abandoning the rabbits to the flames. “No more. Stop talking or I really will slit your throat.”

“It was Mama Hera who offered you the job to kill me, but she wasn’t the only one. A man was waiting for you, a man—” He looked up, blinking rapidly. Then he laughed. “Of course. Unus was right. He will be pleased.”

“You know who hired me to kill Jonus?”

The bitter laugh became a bitter smile. “I know him. And perhaps I’ll even tell you if you help me.”

“I don’t care who it was and I’m not going to help you. This whole job has been a mess from start to finish.”

“I just want an escort to Koi.”

“Koi,” I said. “The place where Prince Tanaka lives. The same Prince Tanaka who just tried to kill you.”

“Yes. Koi. I need to get there.”

I screwed up my face and pressed a hand to my forehead. “I don’t think we are speaking the same language. *They tried to kill you.*”

“Oh yes, but they won’t try it again.”

So ingenuous were his words I almost wanted to get him there just to teach him a lesson, but I shook my head. “No. Kisia is cursed. I’m going

home.”

Using the corner of my stupid maid’s apron so I didn’t burn my hand, I pulled a charring rabbit off the coals and dropped it in front of him, skewer and all. He screwed up his nose. “I’m sorry,” I said. “Would you rather I served it with some plum sauce? Wine?”

The shadows stole all but a hint of his scowl, but he took the rabbit and picked at the charred skin as though it was something distasteful. Rabbit was no favourite of mine, but better a meagre meal full of bones than nothing at all, so I dug in my teeth and ripped off a mouthful of flesh.

Again, no voice of reprimand. She would have told me I didn’t have to eat like an animal, or that I ought not to take my anger out on the good and gentle Leo Villius who was not used to living rough like us.

Us.

Tiny bones snapped as I ripped another chunk off the animal and chewed, sorting meat from bone with my tongue. As I pulled each bone from my mouth, I threw it into the fire, eyeing Dom Villius in the shadows on the other side. He was slowly chewing at a pinch of meat, his eyes glazed as if his thoughts were elsewhere. My own kept catching on every strange sound, sure every time it might be Her.

“I must be tired,” I muttered, swallowing a ball of meat made tasteless by overlong chewing. But although my eyelids were heavy, I knew the weight of fatigue well and it was not like this. It did not pull at one’s thoughts and at one’s soul like a crow at the flesh of the dead.

“Or She took some of you with her,” he said.

“What?”

Dom Villius didn’t look up from his rabbit, didn’t move, and almost I could believe he hadn’t spoken. Then he shrugged. “You were thinking it, I’m just saying it. Who is She?”

“What do you mean I was thinking it? No, you know what?” I shook my head and spat out the last bone. “Don’t answer that. We’re not having this conversation.” I threw down the carcass. “I don’t need your holy shit. That’s the fastest way to end up dead.”

“You’re not going to kill me.”

“Maybe not tonight,” I said, picking meat from between my teeth. “But I have too short a temper to make promises.”

“That doesn’t seem a good trait in your profession.”

“I’m a good actress.”

He lowered his rabbit, barely touched. “Now *that* I’ll give you. You were quite a good maid, though far too old. But then Lord Illus doesn’t seem to like young innocents very much.”

“Did I mention my temper?”

He held up his hands in surrender, leaving the rabbit balanced across his knees by its cooking stick. “Merely an observation. If it’s any consolation, you’re still quite attractive despite your advanced years—at least you are when you’re not scowling or swearing or eating like an animal.”

“So that temper I mentioned. It has a knife to go with it.”

“It was a compliment.”

“Oh, is that what you thought you were doing?” I got up and started away down the hillside.

“Hey! Where are you going?”

“I’m just going to wash your compliment off in the stream,” I said, throwing the words over my shoulder. “Enjoy your rabbit.”

I continued on down the slope, moving slowly from one moonlit tuft of grass to another, a hand out-thrust to find surprise spiderwebs and branches before they hit me in the face. The last thing I wanted to do was shriek so Dom Villius could rush to my rescue.

It had been years since a man’s words had last stung me, many years and another life ago. Feminine perfection had once been necessary, but I had been good at my job, good enough to make a name for myself, to give myself space to breathe, and then Mama Hera had given me new purpose. Brothel girls often talk of their first client, the unforgettable one, but for me that man has faded to the depths of an uncaring memory. But my first kill... To my dying day I would not forget the night of pleasure I gave him, not forget his sleepy smile, not forget the mess I made of his throat with my unskilled fingers, nor his gagging attempts to call for help as his blood poured onto my hands.

My foot sank into the mud of the trickling watercourse, and I heaved a sigh as cool water bit life back into my skin. I splashed it onto my face, but still silence filled my head, a silence so deep it seemed to suck in every other sound in an attempt to fill the void. The bubble of the water. The flurry of thuds as an animal bolted. Leaves whispering. A night bird cawing overhead. Wind. Buzzing insects. Without another voice to dull the world, it

came to me in bright, hot colours.

I tried to ease the clenching of my teeth, to relax, but pain stole through my jaw and into my skull. My thoughts slipped away, back to the hillside where Jonus's body had come to life. Had walked. Had talked. And I knew with the certainty of a true devout that it had not been Jonus who walked. It had been Her.

She had touched his dead face and disappeared into him—taking part of me with Her, Dom Villius had said.

“Damn it.”

I lifted a handful of water to my lips and drank half while the rest trickled down my arms. A few more handfuls sated my thirst while Kisia's attempt at a cool night breeze chilled the now wet fabric of my dress.

It was a trembling hand that withdrew the flask from my boot, a little shake enough to ascertain I had no more than a mouthful or two of Stiff left. I pulled the stopper and set it to my lips, gulping down the burning liquid. It would have been enough to numb the incessant presence of Her, but as I sat waiting for it to envelop me, the silence only hardened like prickles in my head. My clothes felt too loose, my hair all wrong—as soon as I focussed on any part of my body it no longer felt like my body but something all out of proportion.

I closed my eyes, and in the darkness many hands touched me, many voices babbled, laughed, sang, and joked all around me, but when I opened my eyes to see them, they were gone. A reaching hand found nothing but air.

“Hello?” I said to the empty night, feeling like an idiot for there was nothing but small animals in the darkness.

I closed my eyes again and there they were, prodding my skin and sticking fingers in my flesh that came out gleaming with blood. “This is amazing,” one of them said, his face swimming before me alight with excitement. A Kisian face, smeared with blood. “Come and look at this, Your Highness. Come and see.”

“Leave it alone!” came the imperious reply. “Such disrespect is not—”  
*Cassandra?*

I opened my eyes, breathing fast, and tipped up the last dregs of Stiff in my flask. Her voice did not return to reprimand me, nor did the drink ease my fears, and I got up, shaking my head. “Fuck, I must be really tired.”



If someone had come to kill or steal Dom Villius in my brief absence, I would not have been sorry, but unfortunately I was gifted no such reprieve. When I returned, the fire was nothing but a nest of glowing lines on a bed of black and His Grace sat nibbling his dinner in the dark.

“That thing you did before,” I said, glad I could not see the pale colour of his eyes. “You were reading my mind.”

“Such a thing would be impossible, an abomination of God’s will.” He set down the remains of the charred rabbit. “I think it’s time we both got some rest.”

“Then how did you know all that stuff?”

“Chiltae is filled with spies. It is easy to find out anything one wishes to know.”

“And yet still you didn’t see this coming.”

A smile caught in the shifting moonlight. “Goodnight, Miss Marius.”

It is difficult to sleep upon hard ground when one is used to a bed. Add the constant sighs of His Grace, the knowledge that someone might still be hunting you, and a deep, abhorrent silence, and there was no hope. I closed my eyes and let my mind drift into a doze. Pain found me there, spreading through my chest and out into my limbs, contracting my muscles like they were being crushed from the inside. Like they were broken.

“It cannot be anything but the work of devils, Highness,” a man said, one side of his face lit by a spluttering torch. “They must live in the forest there. Perhaps it’s an old battleground with restless ghosts.”

“Devils?” the second man spoke. “Really? That is something our parents might have believed in, Roi, like the sixth law and the hells.”

“Then what do you suggest, Highness? That it is truly the work of the One True God?”

The one called Highness laughed, amusement lighting his boyish face. “Oh no, not that. In truth I don’t know, but I’m curious to find out.” A finger touched my shoulder. Then my face. “It isn’t warm anymore, did you notice that? It’s getting stiff like any corpse; it just won’t stop talking and staring at us.”

“I can stop talking whenever I want,” came a voice as though from my lips, though it belonged to Jonus. “I just don’t want to yet.”

Prince Tanaka—I realised with my slow sluggish thoughts—tilted his head to the side. “I think you won’t have a choice at all soon if everything

keeps stiffening up. It doesn't take long for bodies to begin to decay in this heat, either, so unless you are a devil or a servant of the One True God, or are magic, we won't have to keep you tied up much longer."

The tone was more curious than cruel, his intense gaze waiting for a reaction while the man, Roi, fidgeted at his side. When no answer came, he smiled at his companion. "Be sure no one touches it," he said. "Once we're back in Koi, I am going to find out what this is."

*Cassandra? Is that you? Fear. Deep, bottomless fear. Please help me. I can't get out.*

I woke, blinking at the shifting canopy overhead. Each leaf was rimmed in faint silver moonlight, the same light that traced Dom Villius's outline against the night. The lump of him had not moved, but all that sighing must have tired him out, for his chest rose and fell with an irritating degree of tranquillity while I could barely catch a full breath. I could not have seen them, could not have heard them, but I had. The prince himself had stood there before me, his handsome features alive with the fever of curiosity.

I did not try to sleep again. Instead I sat with my back against a tree and stared at the shifting pools of moonlight on the slope. Three times I checked my flask only to find it empty. My stash had been in my travelling case, and heading back to the broken carriage was too dangerous. I needed Stiff. I needed to finish my contract. I needed to get out of this Godforsaken country before it ate me whole.

On slow, quiet steps I crept toward Dom Villius, blade in hand. *She* would have shouted, perhaps even tried to take control of my limbs, anything to keep me from ending the life of Chiltae's peace envoy, but without her I edged closer unchallenged. His chest rose and fell, one arm curled around himself and the other stretched out across the ground.

I could not take my nameless visitor Jonus's head, but I could take him Leo's. And perhaps, with the right words and the right payment, he might still give me the Witchdoctor—the only man who could fix what was broken, who could return what *She* had stolen. The only man who could make me whole.

I stood over Dom Leo Villius, only son of the hieromonk, but an assassin who hesitates does not stay an assassin long. He opened his eyes. He didn't cry out or move or even look at the blade in my hand, just lay there watching, waiting, expecting the end without fear.

“Who was Jonus?”

I had not intended to ask the question, but my head spun and pain wormed through my body upon a dozen gnawing jaws. He ought to be dead. I ought to have already killed him.

His expression remained mask-like, the face of a man used to being watched. “An actor, hired as a bodyguard,” he said.

“An actor? Why? Were the Levanti not—?” I stopped. “An actor to impersonate you, because beneath the mask, no one knows what you really look like.”

He didn’t answer. I had not been hired to kill Jonus for himself but to ensure Dom Villius died no matter what tricks his entourage played to keep him safe. And the head. I was to bring back the head so they could be sure—really sure—I had killed the right man.

She had told me not to accept the job.

I clenched my hand upon my knife as the gnawing pain grew. Prince Tanaka had been right. Dead men stiffened. Their blood pooled and their bodies rotted. Flies laid eggs in their flesh and crows and vultures picked at their bones. Such things had never worried me because by the time that happened to my body, I would no longer be around to feel it.

But She had brought dead flesh to life, and through Her, I felt it all.

“An unpleasant fate,” Leo Villius said, still not moving from his pile of leaves.

I snarled and stabbed my blade into the dirt beside his head. “Damn you and your...” Unable to find sufficient words, I gestured to my head and then his with clawing fingers. “Right, fine, you win. We go to Koi. That’s where they’ll be taking Jonus, right? The sudden arrival of the real Dom Villius should be enough to get us inside the castle.”

“And after that you can kill me.”

“Is that what I’m thinking? Next time I want to know I’ll just ask you, huh?”

He didn’t answer, just went on staring in the annoying way he had.

“Stop it,” I snapped. “You want to go to Koi, we’re going to Koi. Let’s go before I change my mind.”

## Chapter 9

### Rah

We walked. We walked from dawn until dusk. We walked though we were hungry, though our mouths were parched and our arms ached from the weight of the manacles. We walked a road that seemed to own no end, its stones growing harder beneath our feet with every step. And though there were many of us, we walked alone.

Perhaps because they didn't understand us, or perhaps because they did, I walked at the back of the line, behind Orun, who was behind Kishava and Yitti and on up the line until Fessel—our youngest saddleboy—led the way. No one spoke. No one turned. We just walked beneath the boiling sun, harried by mosquitoes we could not slap away for the tug of the chains. We walked chained, we slept chained, we ate chained, and we shat chained, while always our Chiltaen masters clattered past upon their poor horses. I had been looking forward to the spectacle of one of them attempting to mount a Levanti horse, but their knowledge of us spanned far enough they didn't try.

On the first day we crossed the Ribbon, leaving behind the dry, rocky sea for plains so drenched in sunlight my throat constricted with homesickness. On the second we joined a busy road, but though people passed in carts and on horseback, they showed little interest in us. On the third I had heart only to look at the back of Orun's head. And by the fourth I did not lift my eyes from my aching feet.

On the fifth day a shout cut through the music of clinking chains and scuffing feet. A Levanti shout. My chin lifted as though upon a string and I leant out of line to see around the hulking form of Orun, sweat beading his neck and dampening hair grown overlong.

“Move over! Make space!”

A knot of Chiltaen soldiers stood upon the side of the road, with their own long line of chained Levanti, each as ragged and filthy as we. I did not want to face them, did not want to be seen, but the Chiltaens kept us walking until we drew alongside. They looked at us as we looked at them, assessing, unsure, none of us proud to be found so. I hunted for a branding, but without their paint they were hard to make out.

“Ah, still more of us,” said the young woman at the back of their line, her lean arms bare to the shoulder and one eye bruised. “Seems Levanti might cease being the name of our people and become the name of a plague.”

Our line halted as we came level with theirs, and unable to think of a witty reply, I attempted a salute with my bound hands. “I am Captain Rah e’Torin, Second Swords of Torin.”

“The Second Slaves would be more appropriate in the circumstances, don’t you think, Rah e’Torin?” But she too attempted a salute, the iron of her manacles cutting into wrists rubbed raw and bloody. “I am Dishiva e’Jaroven, Third Swords of Jaroven.”

“Jaroven?” The Torin had made no contact with the Jaroven in my lifetime, but stories about them blew across the plain every season. Their skirmishes against the Tempachi were legend. As a Second Sword, I technically outranked her but said, “It is an honour to meet such storied warriors.”

Her short burst of laughter turned bitter. “They have not been such grand stories of late. And now we are here.” She jerked her head at the man in front of her. “This is Keka e’Jaroven,” she said. “My second.”

The man looked around but said nothing.

“This is Orun,” I said. “My horse master. My second is dead.”

“Did he try to fight? Or run?”

“He challenged.”

“Ah. Our big man likes it when we try to fight.” She lowered her voice, glancing over her shoulder to where the two Chiltaen commanders sat

talking upon their horses. “Legus is his name. What’s yours?”

“Brutus.”

She snorted. “These people have stupid names.”

“They probably think we have stupid names.”

Incredulity took Dishiva’s brows halfway to the short crop of her hair. “Are you standing up for them?”

“No, I just... No. Thinking aloud.”

“Well you had best be careful what you think aloud, Rah e’Torin, or you might end up like Keka here. They didn’t like what he had to say and cut out his tongue.” She jerked her head at the saddleboy standing beside Commander Legus’s horse. “Don’t trust the translators. They won’t even lie to protect us. Traitors.”

Hooves clopped toward us. Legus, riding a horse as stunted as the one Brutus rode, pushed his way between the two lines. A whip hung from his hand, and he leered as we parted like a river that he might ford. Though he did not stop, he slowed as he passed and eyed me up and down, before transferring his gaze to Dishiva. He spoke then, his tone carving meaning into the words that transcended language. His horse blocked sight of her reaction, but when he rode on, swishing his whip in warning, she stood a statue of furious pride.

“Captain,” Orun hissed, his eyes on the retreating horse’s rump. “That horse has crosshatch.”

“What?”

The big man leant closer as Brutus swept past on his own mount. Orun’s eyes followed it as he said, “The bald patches on their rumps. Swamp mites. We don’t often see it because it’s so dry on the plains, but it’ll spread to our horses if they don’t take care.”

“And if it does?”

He didn’t reply, but his grimace was answer enough. I hissed out an obscenity that would have horrified my long-dead mother. “I’ll see if I can talk to the commander when we make camp.”

“We’ve tried.” Dishiva shook her head. “They don’t listen. At least Legus doesn’t, and I don’t imagine your Brute is any better.”

I didn’t correct her but watched after the figure of our captor as he trotted through our ranks. “We can hope.”

“Hope?” Dishiva laughed her bitter laugh. “I don’t know whether to pity

you or envy you, Rah e'Torin. There's no hope for us here."

A shout rose ahead and the music of clanking chains filled the afternoon as we walked on, side by side with the Third Swords of Jaroven.

For the most part, Dishiva walked in silence, breaking it only occasionally to ask questions about our herd back home. How many Swords? How many horses? How about cattle? Where had we last foaled? Where had we wintered? What other herds had we met last cycle? I answered them all, the words taking my mind off the pain in my legs and the bites upon my ankles.

As the afternoon wore on, the thickness of the air increased until we were being boiled in soup. The weight of so much moisture made everything droop—everything except the sun, which remained merciless in its slow hunt of us across the sky.

"Captain?"

The young Levanti who acted as Commander Brutus's translator had fallen in beside me, and I bit back the urge to growl at him. Whatever Dishiva's warning, the boy had done us no harm. He had only been translating the orders, not giving them.

"They won't let us talk for long," he said when I didn't answer. "But I wanted to take the chance to say that I'm sorry. I... I remember you, though I doubt you remember me. I—"

"Where's Gideon?"

"At the big forward camp. With everyone else."

"Everyone?" my parched throat made the question rasp.

Flicking a glance at the Chiltaen commanders, the young man lowered his voice. "A lot of Swords are being exiled, almost as though..." He caught Dishiva's watchful eye and broke off. "They all end up at the camp after being picked up by the Chiltaens the same as you have been."

"Then the First Swords were captured. But what about you?"

"Gideon... gave me away," the young man said, glowering at the stones beneath his feet. "At least that's how it felt. Perhaps he had no choice, I don't know, but he did not fight for me. The Chiltaens wanted translators—quick learners who could pick up their language, and I've always been good at that. I used to go with the traders and listen to the Korune."

"Gave you away? But..." We had the same responsibility to our saddleboys and -girls as to all our Swords. Gideon must have had his hand

forced, however it had looked to the boy. “You were chosen because you were good at languages?”

“Yes, me and two others. Matsimelar and Oshar. Oshar is over there.” He gestured to another long-limbed young man walking beside Commander Legus. “Nuru would have been a better choice, but the Chiltaens didn’t want a girl. They taught us their language, then they split us up. I was sent with Commander Brutus. Matsimelar with Commander Aulus and Oshar with Commander Legus.”

“Why?”

A shrug. “So they could hunt down the groups of Levanti that were showing up in their lands. We were the first, I think. We’d been in Chiltae more than a season before they came for us. We had built a small camp and weren’t bothering anyone... but...”

A pause stole the end of the story and the boy looked at his feet again. I felt bad for not recognising his face, but the Torin were many and the boy had likely changed much as he grew to manhood.

“Is Gideon—”

A shout cut across my words and one of Commander Brutus’s soldiers smacked me in the arm with his sheathed short sword, jabbering and gesturing me off the road. Our chains clanked as we were all jostled together and shuffled into a wet ditch filled with high grass. Orun lost his footing and fell against Dishiva, but she made no complaint, just supported his weight until he regained his feet with a grave growl of thanks. By then she’d already stretched her neck to see why we had been forced off the road.

“What is it?”

“A traveller,” she said. “Wearing enough finery to crush his little horse. Why do these people always travel alone? I’ve not seen more than three men together since we arrived.”

I looked around for the young translator but he had disappeared in the confusion. “Perhaps they don’t value family as we do. The Korune have thousands of names, and rather than add to their herd, they break it apart ever smaller.”

Dishiva snorted, her lip lifting in a sneer. “Like the city folk in Tempachi. They are the same. And when a child loses both parents do you know what they do?”



“What?”

“They throw the child out on the streets to fend for themselves, or put them in prisons. They become servants, slaves, thieves. And then the city folk complain they are a menace. Madness.”

She shook her head as the traveller on the short-legged horse went by, his chin in the air so as not to acknowledge us. His guards did, though, shooting wary glances out the sides of their eyes. Even though we wore chains, they kept their hands upon their weapons just in case.

Once they had passed, more shouts and shoves had us back on the road and moving, our sodden feet dragging beneath the last of the day’s heat. The boy didn’t return, leaving so many questions unasked and unanswered.

Eventually, once evening stained the ground with gold, we stopped. We were used to the routine by now, used to the makeshift camps, to their rough pens for our horses, to their rows of tents and the smell of their cooking. As usual our place was in the centre of the camp, in a bare patch of earth left untouched. Our day’s march ended with an expressionless soldier striding through our midst, counting five Swords then hammering a stake through the chain, trapping us to the hard earth. We would stay there until morning, with nothing but the night sky for a blanket.

Though there were twice as many of us now, the routine remained unchanged. While the Chiltaens took off their helmets and got bowls of steaming food, we sat chained to one another and to the ground. Food came. Stale bread growing mould in places. Water came too, dirty and served in bowls they’d pissed in, but we drank it, my throat so parched after a day’s walk in the sun I would have drunk their piss itself had it been offered.

In a daze of fatigue I stared at the soldiers who held us captive. They moved around their camp the same way we would have done, going about tasks like checking their weapons and feeding their horses, stopping now and then to chat and drink and laugh. Except for the young Levanti translator. I caught sight of him again, sitting alone at the edge of their tents, not one of them, but not one of us either. Given to the Chiltaens to learn their language. The Gideon I knew would never have done such a thing to one of his saddleboys, and yet here the man was, foreign words spilling with ease from his tongue.

My gut churned with more than just sickness from bad food and worse water.

Beside me, Orun stared at the distant horse pens, his jaw working. “At least they haven’t harmed the horses,” I said, keeping my voice low.

“Not harmed them?” the big man snorted. “They are feeding them damp hay. They haven’t taken off their saddles or their cloths. They haven’t brushed them or checked their hooves or done anything but pull on their reins and—” He got to his feet, yanking my arm and Kishava’s up with him. “Brutus!” he shouted, the Chiltaen name sounding odd on his tongue. “Brutus!”

I tugged at the chain linking my wrist to his. “Sit down, Orun,” I hissed. “Keep your mouth—”

“Brutus!”

Conversations broke off as every eye caught to my horse master. I tried to stand at his side, but the chain on my other arm was pegged to the ground, and I could not yank it free any more than I could pull Orun from his stand.

“Brutus!”

Movement stirred around one of the big tents, and both Chiltaen commanders approached in the last of the light, trailing half a dozen men. “Sit down,” I said. “Please, Orun—”

From the group, the young Levanti translator appeared, wringing his hands, his eyes darting to each of us in turn and then to the ground. Commander Brutus stopped before the horse master and folded his arms. He had shown as little interest in us as in our horses over the last few days, but now his eyes were alight and a small smile turned his lips. It remained while he spoke in a gentle croon. The words made Commander Legus let out a low laugh.

“You call for me, barbarian?” the young saddleboy translated. “In my own camp amid my own men you call for me.”

“Your horses have crosshatch,” Orun said, ignoring the laughing commander at Brutus’s side. “They might be resistant to the parasites that cause it, but our horses—”

The Levanti boy had translated as Orun spoke but stopped when Commander Brutus lifted his hand. “You call for me to speak of horses.”

“There is nothing more important than horses, and if you pen ours with yours, they could catch the parasite and die.”

Once again the commander lifted his hand. His smile had widened like a

hungry animal. “You fools and your love of beasts. You really will die for them, won’t you?”

“Yes, because we are Levanti and I am a horse master. Without our horses we are nothing.”

The boy was allowed to finish without interruption, his last words fading into silence. No shifting feet or clinking chains, just the resonant rhythm of my heart beating its fear alone.

“That,” the Levanti boy translated, trembling, “can be arranged. You can watch over them without causing me further trouble.”

Commander Brutus gestured to his soldiers. Two stepped forward, gripped Orun’s arms, and forced him down, forehead to the dirt.

“No—!”

An axe hacked into Orun’s neck. He convulsed as it was lifted, only to be dropped again. Hot blood sprayed into my face, but the job was not done until a third blow sent Orun’s head rolling free. As one, the Second Swords of Torin sucked in a breath, silent in prayer.

The commander gave a satisfied grunt and crouched to retrieve Orun’s head, blood dripping from the severed neck. He handed it to one of his soldiers, who clamped it between his outstretched hands and hurried away toward the horse pens. There he was left to watch over his herd in death, the stink of blood filling the night with the snorts of frightened horses.

Silent tears trickled down my cheeks as the soldiers who had held Orun down unchained his body and, gripping handfuls of his clothing, dragged it away.

“Consider this a lesson to you all,” Commander Brutus said at last, his words emerging from the lips of Gideon’s one-time saddleboy. “We are your masters now.”

“We will never bow down to you!” Chains clanked as Dishiva got to her feet. “The Levanti have no masters. The Levanti cannot be broken.”

They can’t have known what she said, but one of the soldiers stalked toward her and drew back his hand. Dishiva dodged the swing and spat on him. “I am a captain of the Jaroven. You will not touch me.”

The man thrust his torch into her face, but though it crackled close to her skin, Dishiva didn’t flinch. She glared at him through the flames. “Do it. I would rather burn.”

Legus approached her, his melodic tone one used to calm a frightened

child. Yet there was cruelty in his smile and he stalked the tread of a predator.

“Leave her alone!” I said, words wrenched from a throat raw with grief. “You will have no one left to fight for you if you kill us all!”

The boy translated, lifting my words above the growing clamour of discontent, but Commander Legus only laughed. His hand whipped out like a striking snake to close about Dishiva’s throat.

A furious storm of clanking chains erupted as the shadowy figures of Torin and Jaroven lunged only to be jolted back by their manacles. One of the Chiltaens drew his sword, screaming a promise of blood, but still the furore rose. Legus nodded to his men and loosened his breeches.

“No!” I wrenched at my chains, dragging Kishava with me as I reached toward Dishiva. “Stop! You can’t do that!” They were useless words that wouldn’t be understood, but I screamed them anyway, hot tears tracing familiar lines down my face. “You call us barbarians? With the blessing of what god can you do this? St—”

A fist struck my jaw and I stumbled back blind. Blood filled my mouth, but I spat it out and tugged at chains fastening me to the ground, twisting my wrists and trying to slip my hands through holes I knew were too small.

The soldiers had unhooked Dishiva from Keka and kicked him out of the way as he screamed incoherent sounds. She fought, but they pinned her to the ground with their feet upon her ankles and wrists. In the torchlight, sweat beaded her brow, her every muscle tensed as Legus cut the stitching of her leathers.

“No!” The manacles cut into my wrists, spilling blood. “No! Stop, you animals! I am the highest-ranked captain here, it is me you should punish. Tell them, boy! Tell them!” If he did, I did not hear him over the baying of my Swords, howling like chained wolves. “Tell them it’s me they should—”

Dishiva turned her face away as Legus thrust himself into her, and her humiliation struck me like another punch. My tears streamed unchecked, but I could not speak, could not think. They had called us barbarians, but to perpetrate a cruelty that stole from someone their pride, their honour... to make them grieve for themselves under so many watching eyes...

My knees hit the ground, and unable to intrude upon her grief, I looked away.

I had been just a saddleboy the day Gideon lost his *ilonga*. The poor

animal had succumbed to a bout of fever, and he alone had sat with the horse as it died. The rest of us had sat around him in a circle, backs turned, present to give him strength but not to watch for it was wrong to intrude upon a grief that could not be helped. But as he had mourned, we had sung.

We sang for death and illness and pain, and now, though sobs racked my body, I lifted my voice to cut through the other's shouts, hoping to be heard. After a few lines, another voice joined mine—Kishava, her tone low and throaty. Soon more added their might to my song and their stillness to my circle. Far from home and chained like beasts, we lifted our voices so the gods could mark this moment, so that when Dishiva's soul sat upon Mona's scales in death, they would know what pain she had seen in life.

Though they hit us we sang. Though they shouted we sang. Together we sang long and solemn as first Legus and then two of his guards took Dishiva upon the hard ground, and only once they had finished, only once they had stepped beyond our circle, did we stop.



The next day we kept walking. No one hummed. No one spoke. Even the Chiltaens were quiet, leaving only the sound of footsteps and chains and the clop of hooves to fill the day—a day where morning and evening had no meaning, time hazing together into one never-ending moment of thirst. No end to the road, no end to the heat and the mosquitoes and the hunger. No end to the shame. Beside me, Dishiva scowled so ferociously upon the road that it ought to have caught fire. But still we walked.

Until at last we reached what felt like the end of the road and stopped at a camp unlike all the others. No mere makeshift huddle of tents and pens, it was enormous, with rows upon rows of tents. Most were small, but there were large ones too, grand coloured things with fluttering flags reaching from central poles. There were even some buildings, a stream, and from our vantage point upon the road, a large gated area protected by manned watchtowers and filled with even smaller tents.

Manoeuvring amongst ourselves for a better view, we gazed in silence. It was as though every tongue had been cut out, not just Keka's. Had mine? I attempted to touch it but could not reach. "We ought not to be here," I

whispered, surprised to hear my voice emerge dry and hoarse.

We drew closer, and the camp's noise grew until it drowned the clink of our chains beneath chatter and bustle. Chiltaen archers watched us approach, no welcome in their gazes, but as we were ushered through the palisade gate, someone spoke the Levanti prayer of welcome.

Then: "What herds are you from? Where are your captains?" a voice called. "Wait, did you say Torin? Amun! Himi! Istet! Where's—"

A Levanti strode through the mass of filthy bodies, and though he wore different clothes and new scars, there was no mistaking the angular brows of Gideon's blood brother.

"Sett."

"Rah." He threw his arms around me, sweat and sores and all.

He let go, sniffing. "You stink," he said and looked around at the rest of my Swords. "Kishava. Yitti. Where's Eska?"

"I killed him."

A grunt formed his only reply. "Orun?"

"The Chiltaens killed him."

Sett rarely smiled, but at this his customary scowl deepened, and he waved us on through, his gaze lifting over my shoulder to where Commander Brutus rode at our rear.

"Where's Gideon?" I said.

"Out. But he'll see you when he returns. Come, they'll remove your chains once you reach the inner camp." He turned to Dishiva. "Jaroven?"

She pressed her fists together in salute as best she could. "I am Captain Dishiva e'Jaroven of the Third Swords," she said, her pride palpable though her voice cracked and she had to clear her throat.

"Things must be very bad if even the Third Swords of Jaroven have been exiled."

"Worse than I ever imagined they could be," Dishiva said, the grim set of her expression aging her beyond her years. "The missionaries started stealing children. They thought we wouldn't notice because they only took children they thought had no family. Herd Mistress Vizi strung the missionaries up to be eaten by the birds, but the city folk didn't like that much. The raids through the winter were brutal and merciless. The herd mistress died and when... when Patriarch Onokk took her place, he ordered us to give our horses to the missionaries in compensation to their slighted

god.” She spat on the ground. “We refused.”

Sett sighed. “I hear many similar stories. It seems we ought to have been more afraid of the city states’ missionaries than their armies. There was a time they all just lived on the edges of the plains and left us alone, but those days are long gone. They all want to be empires now.”

We entered the inner camp, grass giving way to mud and tents and groups of staring Chiltaen soldiers. They looked up from whatever game of chance they played with their dice and nudged one another, pointing and whispering. One called out something as we passed. Others laughed.

“Ignore them,” Sett said as we walked two abreast in chains between their tents.

Most left us alone once we’d passed, but ahead a small knot of leering men gathered. They called out in Chiltaen and Sett replied.

“What did he say?” I asked. “What did you say?”

“Leave, heathen dog fuckers,” one of the Chiltaens said, glaring at me as he butchered my language.

“Say that again and I’ll slice you,” Dishiva said.

“No!” the man laughed. “*Horse* fuckers.”

A plum hit my shoulder. Another hit Dishiva’s head, sending rotten juice spraying. She turned and snarled, but Sett gripped our elbows and drew us on, shouting an order to the rest of our Swords to keep walking. More fruit rained upon us, and the Chiltaens found their voices, a few boos and hisses becoming a chorus. Only when the tents thinned to makeshift buildings and animal pens did they leave us, stopping their pursuit well short of a second gate.

The muddy track between tent rows continued on the other side, but there were no banners here, no flags, no large bright-coloured tents, only a lot more mud. Here Levanti Swords sat in groups, chatting or eating or watching others wrestle. A game of Hoya was even in progress, the sight of my kin running back and forth between two boundaries marked in the mud making my heart ache for home. It felt absurd to see it here, to watch the teams keeping the small sack aloft with feet and hands and heads as they made for their goal line. Spectators cheered as a young woman slid to keep the sack from hitting the ground and managed to bat it to her teammate.

“Welcome to your new home,” Sett said. “There are empty tents in the far rows. Food comes three times a day, the water’s fresh, and they leave us

alone for the most part.”

“Our horses?” I asked as two Chiltaen soldiers approached us with keys.

“In the pens. They’re looked after well. Better than—”

As my manacles loosened, I lunged, ripping out the soldier’s short sword. I jabbed it toward his gut, but he dodged back and a hand caught my arm. A dark-skinned Levanti hand.

“No blood, Rah,” Sett hissed. The soldier’s scowl seized in place, his eyes darting from me to the man beside me and to the point of his own sword.

“They killed my horse master. They beat us and starved us and you tell me no blood?” A sneer slowly dawned across the pale-haired Chiltaen’s features.

“I know what they’ve done, but if you do this, you will be spitting on the orders of your First Sword. Those are Gideon’s orders, Rah. No blood.”

I looked to him then, not understanding. “He—”

“Drop it.”

“But—”

“Drop it!”

The order burned. Sett e’Torin was my superior, he spoke for Gideon, but I wanted to shout at him, to demand to know why we were living here like pets. They had killed Orun and raped Dishiva, and someone needed to bleed for those wrongs. My knuckles whitened.

“I will have to kill you if you do not.” Sett lowered his voice. “The peace must be kept. They must think us weak. Drop the sword.”

My stiff fingers opened, and the sword dropped point first into the mud, narrowly missing the soldier’s toes.

“Now walk away.”

I turned. And though I could no longer see his face, the weight of the soldier’s mocking stare followed me. Behind me, Dishiva’s manacles thumped onto the ground. I waited for the sound of her attack, of the man’s death, but there were only footsteps and voices as she, and more after her, walked free.

Yitti joined me while the rest of my Swords were unchained. “Everyone will need to be checked over,” he said. “Even those who look all right now may need help.”

“You tell me what you need and I will see it done,” I said.



“My bag if it is still around. Failing that, supplies. Water. Food. Any other healers who can help. I’ll set up by the fire in case I need to use an iron. You’d better find one of those too.”

He neither saluted nor called me captain, and though they were exactly the warning signs Captain Tallus had told me to watch for, I was too weary to care. In truth, I was glad for a moment to do nothing but serve, to atone for my failure, and I hurried away to hunt for what he needed.

There were more members of different Levanti herds in the forward camp than I had ever seen together in one place. Some had forgone inking their brandings and were hard to identify, but there were others with the Torin horse and moon, with the bladed horse of the Jaroven, with the leaping fish of the Sheth and the tree of the Occha. I caught glimpses of many more, some I didn’t even recognise, but there would be time enough to ask questions when we had tended our wounds. In truth, I wanted only one answer right now, and it had to come from Gideon’s lips.

Near the stream, two healers from the Namalaka were tending their wounded, but one took me to find supplies herself. “I could tell you where, but if you’re new, it won’t make sense,” she said, getting up and brushing dirt from her breeches. “We’re just waiting here anyway, not a lot more we can do.”

Her companion agreed with a grimace and said he could manage on his own.

“I’m Memat e’Namalaka, healer of the Second Swords of Namalaka,” she said as she led the way through the maze of tents and campfires and chattering Levanti. “You’ve just arrived?”

“Yes. How long have you been here?”

“Half a season?” she said, her thick dark brows drawing close in the effort of calculation. “Not as long as most of the others. Herd Master Gideon has been here more than a cycle.”

“Herd master?”

“Gideon e’Torin. It is strange to have a herd master that isn’t a Namalaka, but he speaks the Chiltaen language and makes sure we have food and supplies, so it seems the best title for him. He rode off on a mission a few days ago, but I’m sure he’ll be back soon, then you can meet him for yourself.” Shock left me speechless and she went on, full of smiles and energy. “What herd are you from?”

“The Torin.”

She narrowed her eyes in sudden suspicion. In the distance a cheer rose from the Hoya game. “Torin? Are you with the Second Swords then?”

“Yes, I’m Captain Rah e’Torin.”

“Then you already know him! What a nice surprise for when he returns.” Still unable to find an appropriate answer, I said nothing until she stopped outside a tent that was larger than the rest. “Here we are. Do you want help carrying things back?”

Carrying supplies as well as her cheer, Memat led me back to the main fire where Yitti was already tending Fessel. The saddleboy had borne the brunt of many beatings at the front of our line and his face was covered in bruises. The twins, Himi and Istet, sat beside him, both with gashes on their arms, and Gam lay upon the dirt with his arms wrapped over himself in place of a blanket.

“Yitti, this is Memat, a healer from the Namalaka,” I said, dropping the herb pouches and bandages beside the fire while the Memat set down a cauterising iron, a pair of wooden bowls, and a large flask. On the ground, Gam groaned. His face was red and he was trembling. “What can I do?”

Yitti handed me one of the bowls. “Water,” he said, and without question I went, glad to keep moving. He kept me busy for most of the afternoon, cleaning wounds, heating the iron, and fetching more supplies. Other healers dropped by, offering help, and a second of the Oht showed my Swords to empty tents. I had not felt so at home since being exiled and found I hated it and loved it in equal measure. Hated it for the circumstances under which I felt it, and loved it because after everything the Chiltaens had done to us, they had failed to break our spirits.

When at last I had done all I could, I took some food out away from the firelight toward the palisade wall, hunting a moment of peace. Instead I found Kishava sitting alone in the darkness. Silent. Unmoving. No food in her hands.

I held out my rations. “You must be hungry.”

“Yes, but I will not eat while I grieve.”

Orun? Her horse? Her freedom? Perhaps all three, it didn’t matter; grief was the same regardless of the object.

“I wish to be alone.”

“Then may Nassus be with you.”

Kishava just nodded, and shame flooded me as I moved on. Shame at how grateful I was in that moment not to take on her burdens as well as my own.

“Has any captain ever done so poor a job at caring for his Swords?” I said to the night. Thankfully, it did not reply. I plonked myself upon a tussock of grass.

“Captain?”

Annoyance twinged within me as Juta approached.

“Juta,” I said, forcing a welcoming smile. “Have you seen Yitti?”

“Yes, Captain, just now. He says my youth served me well and I will soon be as strong as ever.”

A bitter laugh was all the response I gave. If only Yitti could reach such a verdict for the others. I had seen too many beaten and watched them walk, coughing blood. With luck we would burn only five in this place, but for what? At least in battle, death meant something. Here it meant nothing.

Juta sat beside me. “One of the First Swords of Qara said she was Made here. I’m going to be sixteen soon.”

“Ah,” I said. “And you want to know if you can be Made too. Afraid you might die and have your sacrifice go unseen by the gods?”

The boy’s eyes widened.

“Oh no, of course,” I said. “You are young and therefore invincible. You want to be Made for the sake of glory.” Despite all we had gone through, the world carried on. “Well, just because we are far from home does not mean we should abandon our traditions. If our slave masters did not throw away our branding iron, then I see no reason why not. Though not until everyone is well again.”

Or dead.

“Thank you, Captain,” Juta said, but he did not immediately get up to leave. “Do you... do you think we should have fought?”

I had asked myself the same question without coming to an answer, but it surprised me to hear it on his lips. I wouldn’t have dared ask it of my captain when I had been a saddleboy. He seemed to realise this, but before he could excuse himself in embarrassment, I said, “More would have died if we had.”

Of course, more might still die. My Swords had forced my hand, but I was their captain. Their lives were my responsibility and I had failed them

before ever Commander Brutus had come for us. Eska had been right. We ought to have gone home.

Juta stood and lifted his fists in salute. "Sorry, Captain. Thank you."

I smiled until he had gone, then I threw what remained of my bread into the night. "This is the fucking cesspit at the end of the world," I muttered, and so absorbed was I in my morose thoughts that it was some time before the growing noise cut through them. Hooves. Shouts. I stood, peering toward the fires where shadowed figures hurried. Horses appeared, slowing to mill about the fire.

"Healers!"

Sett's voice. I ran back toward the camp and into the mass of gathering Swords. Juta was there, craning his long neck.

"What's going on?"

"Some injured Swords have returned," he said.

"Gideon?" I pushed my way through the crowd of shorn Levanti.

I found Sett the centre of activity, shouting orders. Yitti's face appeared briefly amid the chaos only to disappear into the stink of blood and dying flesh. A horse was led past, its flank crimson.

"Sett!"

The man's head turned. "Not now, Rah," he said, then added, "Set up around the fire. Yitti already has cauterising irons heating."

Two Jarovens carried an injured man between them, shouting for the crowd to make way as their cargo hissed at every jolt. Blood covered his face.

"Gideon?" I said, reaching Sett's side.

"Alive. Busy. He'll see you tomorrow."

His glance shied to the only fine, brightly coloured tent in our area, a glory of Chiltaen uselessness. I hadn't noticed it until now, so surrounded it was with other large tents.

I allowed myself to be jostled aside, out of the firelight and the bustle. A stillness hung about Gideon's tent as though it sat on sacred ground, and keeping my eyes on Sett, I edged around the crowd toward it. No shout followed, no warning, and seeing a flicker of lantern light from within, I stepped silently inside.

"—dead, the Kisians took the body," Gideon was saying. Gideon. Years since I had seen him, and there he sat perched on a table in the flickering

light. Tep e'Torin, the healer of the First Swords, had his back to me as he worked with his needle. My heart leapt at the sight of them both.

“How?” a third man asked, a Chiltaen with a fancy green cloak over his breastplate. “Your orders were clear.”

“The woman he hired, she—” I had made no sound, yet Gideon squinted into the darkness. “Out,” he said, though as the word left his lips, his eyes widened. “Wait. Rah?”

I stepped in to the light, conscious of my own hesitation. There was a hardness about Gideon’s face I had never seen before. “Gideon.” I lifted my fists in salute.

“Who is this?” the Chiltaen demanded, and only then did I realise he was speaking Levanti.

“This is Captain—I assume you are still their captain—Rah e'Torin of the Second Swords of Torin.”

“Ah, the new arrivals. Tell him to wait outside. And not to interrupt again.”

The man did not look at me, just folded his arms and waited. Gideon jerked his head toward the entrance, his stare communicating enough to hollow my gut. I saluted again and walked out.

Outside, the chaos had quietened to a tense buzz and Sett was nowhere to be seen—a small mercy. Screams sounded from the direction of the fire. Whatever Gideon’s mission had been, he and his Swords had suffered for it.

After a time, Tep exited the tent. He was much older than I and had long been one of the herd’s most revered healers, but still I stepped into his path. “What is going on?”

“What is going on is that you should have stayed on the plains,” he said, wiping Gideon’s blood on the rag that hung from every healer’s belt. “The captain will explain. I have more injuries to tend.”

He disappeared into the camp only to be replaced by Sett and his scowl. “Don’t give up, do you?”

“No.”

He grunted something like a laugh. “Is he alone?”

“No.”

Sett folded his arms, and in silence we waited until the Chiltaen emerged. He stepped out and straightened his cloak, and ignoring us both, he strode toward the gate. From inside the tent, Gideon called for his

second.

With a glare that said *stay here*, Sett entered, leaving me to stamp my feet as the night breeze chilled my tired bones. He soon emerged and jerked his head toward the tent. “Well go on, he’s waiting for you.”

Inside, Gideon still sat perched upon the table, adjusting a bandage that covered Tep’s needlework. When it healed, it would add yet another scar to the tapestry that was his torso.

“Rah.” His face split into a smile and he stepped forward to embrace me tightly, forcing a pungent smell of herbs up my nose and drawing forth old memories. “It is good to see you again.”

“And you,” I said and meant it, my heart singing to be reunited with this man I had called brother. “We thought you were dead.”

Releasing me, he took a clean tunic from the back of a chair and yanked it over his head. “I’m sorry for that.”

I had fasted two days and nights at the Motepheset Shrine. Offerings had been given and I had grieved, because no exiled Torin had ever chosen not to return.

“Why did you not come? Are you a prisoner here?”

The question held more accusation than I had intended, and Gideon’s smile twisted. “It is a long story, Rah. Join me?”

He gestured to a tray of food upon the table, food much finer than anything being served out by the cooking fires—fish, nuts, rolled-up leaves, a cured meat of sorts I didn’t recognise, and a whole bowl of grapes. Wine too. He poured some and downed the whole glass before pouring again, this time sliding one goblet across the table to me and keeping the other for himself.

Gideon groaned as he settled into the chair. “I hoped I would see you here sooner, you know,” he said, smiling. “Terrible of me to wish for your exile, but you were much missed, my friend. Much missed.”

I stared into the dark red wine. “I missed you too. I still don’t understand why you didn’t come back.”

“Because there’s a future here, and only a slow death there,” he said, leaning forward and squeezing one of my hands, such warmth in his understanding smile. “I know you don’t see it yet. Sett told me you’ve had a rough time, that—”

“A rough time? They killed Orun. They raped a captain of the Jaroven.

My Swords were beaten, Gideon. They were killed. They were starved. They gave us foul water and chained us to the ground and they took our horses.”

“Yes, I know,” he said, still holding my hand. “But they will not harm you here. And here I have men in the horse pens, so they will be well looked after.”

“And my Swords? When they die from being starved and beaten and chained? Have you men preparing pyres, too?”

I pulled my hand away and turned so he would not see my tears, and for a time we sat in silence. Only once my shoulders stopped shaking did he speak again.

“Rah, I know how you feel. I was the same when we came here. We were the first—no one before us to mark our path. We were angry and we were frightened, but we stood proud because we are Levanti. I could have raged and despaired, but I didn’t. I learnt their language and found some willing to learn mine. Things change. Alliances change. The world changes, and you must change with it or you’ll die fighting it.”

Gideon’s eyes were alight with the same fire Eska’s had held, and with the remembrance of him and everything that had happened since we lost him, I sagged. Exhaustion stole all but the core of my anger. “Is our home not worth fighting for, too?”

“I don’t want to fight my own people. And that’s what it would be, not fighting the ring of city states, but the Levanti who are choosing to put the One True God above their own people.” He took a nut from the untouched meal and crunched it between his teeth. “You look as though you don’t believe me, but tell me how you ended up here.”

I set my head in my hands, to hold it up any longer requiring more effort than I had left. “I refused to stand down when some Korune soldiers came for our horses, though Herd Master Reez ordered me to. We killed them.”

“Of course you did. And you got the satisfaction of fighting for your herd while Reez got his reason to be rid of you. Very neat. Now he has only unseasoned warriors who will be no match for raiders.”

“But why?”

Gideon shrugged. “I wish I knew, but I’ve heard similar stories from everyone who comes. Perhaps the city states have finally given up trying to destroy us by more conventional means and are using enchantments.” He

chuckled. “We’ve always moved around too much for them to wage war on us the way they like.”

When I didn’t answer, he once more reached across the table and gripped my arm, lowering his head to look me in the eye. “You haven’t been here long enough to understand what we are trying to achieve, but you trust me.”

“Of course.” And I did. Even after so long apart. I had wanted to find him, had recklessly hoped he still lived, and now here he was, taking some of the responsibilities from my shoulders. I let out a shaky breath.

“Good. Take care here. Don’t attack any Chiltaen no matter what provocation they give you. Just trust me and do as I ask. We will get our revenge. And a new life.”

“Captain?” Sett strode in, his face a block of hard lines. “It’s done. They got what they wanted. His Holiness has declared war and the Nine have no choice but to move.”

Gideon sat back, a smile quirking his lips as he looked at me. “It looks like you arrived just in time.”



## Chapter 10

### Miko

Members of the Kisian nobility crammed into the throne room, filling it to bursting with silk and jewels and hushed chatter. The imperial oath ceremony was never poorly attended, but this year so many had come in the hope His Majesty would name his heir that the heat was almost unbearable. And though the tang of sweat spiced every breath and men and women alike were fanning themselves, they all seemed loath to step out for fresh air in case they missed the excitement.

Two days had passed. Two days of Mother keeping to her room. Two days of thinking over everything Emperor Kin had said to me in the hunt for hidden meaning. Two days of fearing the war that was surely coming. I tried to tell myself it might not, but it was not some small-time merchant Tanaka had killed, it was Dom Leo Villius.

The Chiltaen ambassador had not walked in the gardens since.

Although two days had passed, news only began to arrive the morning of the ceremony, stories from travellers' lips, running ahead of Kisia's returning hero. The Chiltaens had sent hundreds of soldiers raiding across the border and Tanaka had been there to see them off. It soon became thousands, not only Chiltaen soldiers but barbarian mercenaries too, and by the time the ceremony began, people were whispering of Tanaka's brave stand against dozens while the Chiltaen leaders fled crying into the trees. He was coming, they said. The prince was returning today.

Upon the Crimson Throne, Emperor Kin sat tall and proud as he surveyed the court. Calm, assured—ever a player upon a stage.

At his side, Mother sat upon her divan, her headdress reaching the same height as his crown. To anyone who did not know her that might have appeared a happy coincidence, but I knew better.

“How the wolves circle,” Ambassador Reedus said, joining me at the front of the room, dressed in his finest robes. “If many more try to fit in, we will all run out of air.”

His smile was not friendly, merely the forced civility of a diplomat. I wanted to apologise, to beg his help, but people were watching and His Majesty was right there. All I could say was the first clever thing that came into my head. “And you are not one of those wolves, Ambassador?”

“I am but His Majesty’s humble servant, Your Highness.”

“His humble servant, or Kisia’s?”

Silence slowly settled over the room, blooming in patches like wildflowers upon a field. “Your Highness means something by those words?” he said, and I turned, hoping to communicate my meaning with a look. But he was watching the scene upon the dais—the sight of the emperor and empress sitting side by side one only ever seen in this sacred space and nowhere else.

“I refer to our... conversation the other day, Ambassador.” I kept my voice low in the spreading hush.

Ambassador Reedus raised his spiky grey brows. “The one you should hope I forget, Your Highness?”

“No, the one you should try to remember. Tanaka and I are—”

I swallowed the rest of the words as Emperor Kin rose to his feet. Bathed in the crimson light that discoloured all it touched, he lifted one twisted hand. “Here before witnesses I take the imperial oath,” he said, his voice carrying well despite his failing body. “To Kisia I give my strength. To Kisia—”

“If you wish to blame someone for ruining your plans,” Reedus hissed in my ear, “blame your brother.”

“My plans?” I returned, barely moving my lips while the emperor continued his oath.

“—In service of the empire I am nothing—”

“You came to me, Your Highness.”

“—I will protect her from foes—”

I clenched my hands into fists. *Just a stupid little girl playing with gods.* All that planning, and for what?

“—Here and now before the divinity of the gods—”

Ambassador Reedus lowered his voice still further. “There is nothing that can be done to stop this now, no price high enough that it can atone for such heresy no matter what my thoughts on war. Prince Tanaka has brought this not only on himself but the whole of the empire.”

I stared at the ambassador, who twitched a lifeless smile before returning his attention to the dais as though it had never wavered.

“—In duty, I am Kisia.”

As one, the crowd held its breath, waiting for him to go on and finally name his heir or at least speak about Tanaka’s attack on the Chiltaens... Something. Anything. And when nothing came, when the silence stretched thin, all they could do was put their hands together in polite applause. I knew not whether disappointment or relief rang loudest in my heart.

Whatever his intentions might have been before, he could not name Tanaka now.

In my brother’s absence, I would have to renew my oath at Emperor Kin’s feet first, and I awaited a signal from the chancellor to proceed. Year after year I’d sworn loyalty to the man who had sought my death, had sown such fear, but today I could not forget his words or the grief in his voice as he spoke of war. *An emperor serves his people. The day the people serve the emperor is the day the empire falls.*

When the chancellor lifted his hand, I walked to the Humble Stone and knelt, pressing my forehead to the smooth boards. A pause, counting to five before I rose, risking a glance up at the hard-lined face beneath the crown.

“As you give your oath to Kisia, so I give my oath to you,” I said. “Long live Emperor Kin.”

“Long live Emperor Kin!” the audience cried, their words washing at my back. I let my gaze slide to my mother, and for a moment she met it, only to look away, her porcelain face hiding a skeleton of steel and a heart of stone.

With another bow, I backed away to make space for the next courtier. Everyone had to renew their oath each year, even Emperor Kin’s own cousin Bachita Ts’ai, though he had been Kin’s assumed heir before Tanaka

came of age.

“Hello, Koko.”

Anxiety twisted Edo’s smile, yet he looked as beautiful as ever in the very finest of tan silk robes threaded with golden evergreens. He bowed, belatedly recalling that we were not alone. “Your Highness,” he said. “It is good—”

“I think an introduction is required, my son,” said the man at his side, also bowing, while at the head of the room, someone else renewed their oath.

“Indeed, Father.” The word came awkwardly to Edo’s tongue. “Allow me to introduce Princess Miko Ts’ai. And Koko, this is my father, His Grace of Syan, Hiroto Bahain.”

I had only ever seen His Grace of Syan from a distance, on the few occasions he had been summoned to court. He was a lean man, not as finely featured as his son, though there was enough resemblance to mark them as family. The long lashes. The intent stare. Something in the line of their jaw when they smiled.

“Long live Emperor Kin,” the court spoke as one, except for the duke.

“I was hoping to have a chance to meet you, Your Highness,” he said instead as the noise died down. “Edo speaks very highly of you.” His smile looked the same but it lacked Edo’s sweetness.

“That is very kind of him.”

Edo turned toward the door, no doubt awaiting a glimpse of Tanaka. If the duke noticed his son’s preoccupation, he showed no sign of it. “We leave for Syan in the morning.” His gaze flicked toward the dais. “But we intend to be in Mei’lian in the spring. Perhaps, if all goes well, we might yet see an alliance between our families.”

His brows lifted as the chorus of “Long live Emperor Kin” rang through the throne room again. “Ah,” he said before I could digest his words, let alone respond to them. “It seems my oath will soon be required. Whatever would we do without bureaucracy and sandal licking?” He bowed low to me. “Your Highness.”

I watched him go, the expression on Edo’s face part apology, part wonder. “I’m sorry,” he said, finally settling on the former. “He does seem to like to get all his words out before anyone else has a chance.”

“I like him,” I said. “I hope you like him.”

“Yes.” He smiled the sweet, wistful smile he rarely directed at me. “I think I do.”

Silence fell where Tanaka would have spoken, stretching awkwardly until Edo cleared his throat. “Chancellor Nobu appears to be trying to get my attention. I should prepare to make my bow to His Majesty now too.”

Alone again, I considered escaping the airless room, but eyes pinned me from everywhere. More eyes than seemed to be watching Grace Bahain renew his oath. Until a shout echoed out in the antechamber, and for a brief moment I was invisible as every head turned.

“The prince is here. The prince has returned!”

Whispers spread through the gathered nobility, oaths forgotten. People pressed toward the doors, while to the side of the room, Ambassador Reedus stood with his secretaries and personal guards, creating a knot of Chiltaen aggression that was hard to ignore.

Tanaka strode into the throne room on a murmuring tide. He was the same twin brother I had known all my life, and yet somehow he stood taller, his crimson surcoat swishing behind him with every confident step.

The audience bowed in a spreading wave, buzzing with quiet excitement. Upon the dais, Mama had stiffened, eyes for no one but her son and the still, shrouded form being carried behind him. Four men followed: Lord Roi, Lord Rasten, another whose face I did not recognise, and Isamu Kato, the old count of Suway’s heir.

Bathed in the coloured light from the stained windows, Tanaka approached the Humble Stone alone, his surcoat quieting to an eddy about his feet. “Your Majesty. I have brought you a gift.”

I reached out a hand to stop him, but the scene kept playing, my twin kept speaking, and as Emperor Kin had said, the world changed yet again. Fragile moments stressing even more fragile alliances. Tanaka had brought a boot to crush them all. A boy’s plan. Just as mine had been the plan of a little girl flailing against her shackles.

I threaded my way through the crowd, arriving once more at the front of the room just as the servants lowered their shrouded litter to the stones.

“A gift?” The scars on Emperor Kin’s face cut deep. “What sort of gift?”

Silently, I begged Tanaka to look my way that he might heed my warning, but instead he knelt to draw back the shroud. From my place at the front of the crowd, I had an unobstructed view of a handsome face, its open

eyes staring at the high ceiling. Necks craned around me. Excited chatter rose. Clearly he was dead—his body was full of holes, each owning a ring of crusted blood—yet he appeared merely to be resting. But for the smell, I might have believed it.

At a nod from the emperor, General Ryoji stepped down from the dais to examine the body. Unlike many of the nobles in the front rows, he didn't press a sleeve to his nose, but he did murmur a prayer and close the young man's eyes. For a breath they stayed closed, before they snapped back open.

I jumped, heart in my throat, but the corpse made no other move. His eyes did not hunt the room, just went on staring up.

"What have you done?" the emperor said.

"Done? I have protected the empire, Your Majesty," Tanaka said. "I've brought you the body of Dom Leo Villius of Chiltæ, the very man you chose as husband to my dear sister. He has betrayed us, riding against us with a full complement of Levanti horsemen."

Lord Roi stepped forward and handed Tanaka a sack, which he immediately upended. Scraps of flesh spilled onto the black floor. "The brands of bought warriors. Chiltæ's new allies. Do correct me if I am wrong, Ambassador."

Ambassador Reedus stared at what, in another light, might have looked like scraps of fabric tipped from a lady's sewing bag. But each owned hair and skin and blood and a brand in the shape of a horse's head.

The ambassador began to speak, but Tanaka cut him off, lifting his voice louder still. "I went to meet Dom Villius," he said, spreading his arms and turning so that all could see his sincerity. "It shocked me that no party was there to welcome my brother-to-be across the border. But when I extended the hand of friendship, it was steel I received at my throat."

Gasps and whispers spread. Tanaka nodded sadly, truly in his element like a butterfly having awakened from its cocoon. "His Majesty has worked so hard to ensure peace, giving them everything, even his own daughter, and still they attack us at every opportunity. We let one into Kisia, and he brings a hundred mercenaries at his back!"

Angry mutters consumed the room.

"It's a lie!" Ambassador Reedus cried, stepping forward from his men. "If Levanti rode with him, it was for protection only. Dom Villius was a true child of God and he came upon a peaceful errand, a token of our mutual

desire to move beyond this endless need to fight over our beginnings. These cities may have been our cities once, but we do not want another war. We do not want anyone alive now to die for the losses of those long dead.”

“Such grand professions!” Tanaka lifted his arms as though in praise of the gods. “Such consideration and kindness. I suppose the people of Tirin’s Gap are dead by accident then? The town of Lamai set itself on fire? Admit you are here merely to blind us to Chiltae’s real plans, and I could respect your honesty if nothing else.”

The ambassador drew himself up, looking ridiculous in Kisian robes and yet managing to scowl like a storm cloud. “How dare you suggest such a thing. You’re a warmonger and a liar, and you have treated the body of one holy to us with the greatest disrespect. I insist that the body be moved at once. It is not an object to be stared at.”

And yet that was exactly what Emperor Kin was doing. He had leant forward upon his throne and seemed not to have heard anything the ambassador said. “You are sure he is dead?”

Still beside the body, General Ryoji nodded. “He smells dead.”

By this time the oppressive stink of decaying flesh had forced its way into my mouth and nose, yet I dared not cover my face lest someone notice and draw me into the scene unfolding like a play upon a stage.

“Smells dead, yes,” said the emperor. “But not dead enough for a man killed three days ago. He ought to smell much worse in this weather.” He looked at Tanaka. “What did you do?”

“We filled him with dozens of arrows, but he kept walking around and calling down curses upon us, even once he had no blood left.”

Mother had always worn her paint like a mask and her silk robes like a shield, never showing fear, but she stared at the corpse like a wide-eyed child. With a shaking hand to her lips, she spoke for the first time. “Does it... does he have a... mark, General?”

I knew not what she meant, but the general didn’t question, just lifted one limp arm, followed by the other, then shook his head.

Mother sagged like a worn-out doll and spoke no more.

“I object very strongly.” Ambassador Reedus trembled with fury or horror or both. “I insist the body be removed from such scrutiny. If the spirit of the One True God still moves within him, it ought not be a sight for —” He halted whatever he had been about to say and cleared his throat.

“For unbelieving eyes.”

The emperor nodded, and a knot of servants stepped from behind the dais. Each tried not to gag as they carried the litter away under the staring gaze of the court. Though Tanaka and his four companions still held the floor, Ambassador Reedus bowed deeply in thanks. “And I can assure you that whatever illusions Prince Tanaka is under,” he said, taking his opportunity, “there was no plan to attack your border in such a manner. And certainly not one led by Dom—”

“I believe His Holiness the hieromonk has been known to ride with the army,” Tanaka said. “Has he not, ambassador? Was he not leading charges at the Battle of Tian some years ago as the Hand of God? If the father can, then why not the son?”

Ambassador Reedus pursed his lips. “Because Dom Leo Villius is a child of the One True God.”

“And the head of your church is not? Perhaps I was mistaken and it was another His Holiness the hieromonk of Chiltae who beheaded all the Kisian soldiers who surrendered that day.”

Placating hands were spread. “Terrible things happen in war, young prince. If you want atrocities, I could name you many committed by both sides. Give me an honest man who saw Dom Villius strike first and I—”

“And you would say I paid him. Or that he is a northern rebel still loyal to the blood of my ancestors. Dangerous to stand in such a place and say such things, don’t you think, Ambassador? Perhaps losing your head would provide you with some perspective.”

“You—”

The emperor rose from his throne as though every ounce of effort was required to force himself upright. “I am the Emperor of Kisia,” he said, his deep voice reverberating through the grand room. “I am the chosen representative of the gods. I have once more given myself to Kisia in body and soul and that means I alone can speak for her and for her people.”

“If you speak for Kisia, then stand up for her,” Tanaka said. I sucked in a breath at such a plea, my heart hammering. I had heard him speak such impassioned words time and time again in the safety of our rooms, but there was no safety here, only staring eyes and damning lips. “Do not let your policies be decided by old grudges. Do not let the north suffer because it once harboured the Otakos. Do not let Chiltae dictate every term and come



and go from every peace treaty as they please. Fight for the *whole* empire. Fight to keep our people safe from the decadent slavers along the Ribbon. You think they want peace? They just want to crush us beneath their heels.”

“Enough, Tanaka,” Emperor Kin snapped.

“Enough?” Tanaka turned, speaking as much to the crowd packed into the throne room as to the emperor. “You wish me silent, but when would it be more appropriate to speak? When they are already marching across our border? When Ambassador Reedus pays someone to kill us all in our sleep? When you’ve sold the only remaining daughter of Otako blood to a pack of honourless men, and for what? There will never be peace between us, Your Majesty, not while they mock our culture and our customs, not while they raid our lands, not while they steal and rape and burn what is ours.”

“And not while you spit the very hate you claim to deplore,” Emperor Kin said, the quiet words cutting through every sound. But when he ought to have gone on, to speak and persuade and be as impassioned as Tanaka, Emperor Kin sagged. From the silence, whispers spread. Mother signalled a servant. And Tanaka watched as I did, as the world changed in a series of tiny gestures, made and not made, in words spoken and unspoken, a moment history might never remember at all.

One of His Majesty’s personal servants stepped onto the dais and took his arm. He was just going to leave.

“You have not even the strength to stand up for Kisia now!” Tanaka shouted, goaded to further speech. “You cannot walk away from this. If you cannot rule, then step aside.”

I pressed a hand to my lips.

Fear froze the room, and His Majesty slowly turned back to face Tanaka. “Are you challenging the will of the gods?”

“No,” Tanaka said. “I am challenging your ability to continue ruling the empire. Right now our people need a strong emperor, one who can fight for them, for Kisia, for everything you once stood for and everything you have let go as age and infirmity have taken their toll. Go gracefully, Your Majesty, you lose no honour in that.”

The emperor narrowed his eyes, standing so still he might have been a statue of himself. “And if I do not?”

Every pair of eyes fell upon Tanaka and the lords at his back, lords whose crimson surcoats hid the blood of their enemies. “I cannot let you

destroy Kisia,” Tanaka said. “I will do what has to be done.”

Words from which there was no return.

“That,” said the emperor, enunciating the word clearly. “Is treason.”

“Not from where I’m standing.”

“General Ryoji, arrest Prince Tanaka.”

No one could miss the hesitation of a man being thrown between fighting tigers, but whatever went on behind the general’s eyes, his lips said, “Yes, Your Majesty.”

At a sign from their commander, a handful of imperial guards formed a protective ring around Emperor Kin; the rest approached Tanaka. Upon her divan, Mother might as well have been chiselled from stone.

“I thought it might come to this,” Tanaka said as the men behind him drew steel. “But you see, I know something you would prefer the world did not know. You have tried to kill me. You have planned to set me aside. You have tried to pretend I did not exist because your claim to the throne relied on Emperor Lan having no permissible heir. But it was a lie then and it’s a lie now. Grace Tianto may have been struck from the succession, but Katashi Otako was the true heir to the throne, and I”—he threw his arms wide—“am Katashi Otako’s son and heir. This castle is my ancestral home. The citizens of Koi are my people, and that, *Father*, is my throne.”

My heartbeat hammered in my ears. “No,” I whispered into my hands. “No, Tanaka, no. Don’t do it. Not like this.”

Mother’s face burned as crimson as her robe, and the roiling outcry caught General Ryoji in their tide. Frozen between Tanaka and the dais, he looked to the throne, but no help came.

“Katashi Otako was a traitor to his own blood.” Emperor Kin’s words were no less fierce for being quietly spoken. “Katashi Otako was a murderer. Thousands died because of him. To acknowledge him as your father does you no service here.”

“You knew and you lied to keep the throne for yourself.”

“Of course I knew!” Kin roared and a roar it was, his fury erupting as though from the great maw of a black bear. “You look the same. You walk the same. You talk the same. You stand there with your arms spread like a god and think everyone will bow before you because you’re an Otako and so did he. But he was a traitor and so are you.” The emperor strode to the edge of the dais, possessing more strength in his rage than I had seen in

many years. “You have done everything you could to undermine the power of the throne. You have spat upon peace and for what? So many thousands more will die because of an Otako. Call the executioner!”

Gasps seemed to suck all the air from the room, and I could not breathe. “No!” Mother cried, gripping Kin’s arm. “He is my son.”

“But as he has just announced, he is not mine,” the emperor growled. “I owe him nothing. Tanaka Otako, you are hereby disinherited. From this moment forth, you are no longer a Ts’ai and have no claim upon the throne your father sought to destroy. In payment for the crime of attacking and killing Dom Leo Villius of Chiltae and for challenging the right of the emperor, the gods’ representative upon the Crimson Throne, you are sentenced to death. What are you waiting for, General? Do you need a clearer order?”

General Ryoji’s frightened gaze hunted the room, finding only courtiers with their hands to their mouths. Someone cried. People standing close risked glances my way, but I could not move. My tongue had grown fat and stupid and my feet were rooted to the shiny black floor.

The imperial executioner entered, the imperceptible scent of death he carried cutting a path through the crowd more surely than the axe in his hands.

Tanaka’s four companions licked their lips and adjusted their grips, eyeing the imperial guards before them.

“Expecting more friends to step forward?” the emperor said. “It is easy to make friends when you can pretend you’re the heir to the Crimson Throne. Don’t expect to keep them when you are no one, when you have spat on our traditions and ensured a war that will destroy everything we have fought to build.”

Once like an ascendant god, Tanaka shrank, his fists balling and his face reddening like a thwarted child.

“Unfortunately for Lords Roi, Rasten, Vitako, and Kato, they have already declared themselves,” Kin went on, his figure rimmed in an aura of crimson light. “But let it not be said that I am unfair, for they did so under false assumptions. Any who wish to back down now may leave.”

Lord Roi’s blade hit the floor as he dropped to his knees, bowing his head to the wood. “Please forgive me, Your—”

Hate set the emperor’s features, and at a nod, the executioner’s axe

cleaved skin and flesh and bone. Blood gushed from either side of Lord Roi's neck, and like a ball, his head rolled between one of the imperial guard's legs.

In the smothering silence, Executioner Ru gripped the axe handle and rocked the blade back and forth to ease it free of the gash in the boards.

"I trust men without honour even less than I trust traitors who side with an Otako bastard against their emperor. Does anyone else wish to throw themselves upon my mercy?"

Silence.

"Good. General, have Lords Rasten, Kato, and Vitako escorted to the cells."

For a heart-stopping moment, I thought they would fight, but the three lords each dropped their weapons and allowed the guards to lead them away through the crowd. Whatever words of support or love they might have received were stifled. No one spoke. No one moved. Caught at the Humble Stone beside a spreading pool of blood and the immobile body of Lord Roi, Tanaka flexed his fingers as he always did when troubled. I wanted to go to him, to take that hand and squeeze it tight, but I could not move.

"Any last words, traitor? I will allow you that much."

"Stop this," Mother hissed. "This humiliation is punishment enough."

"You never seemed to think so. Let the boy speak for himself."

Boy. A deliberate slap. Tanaka kept squeezing his hands into fists and letting them go. There were discarded weapons upon the floor, and only half the number of imperial guards now stood between him and the emperor. I knew his mind too well to doubt what thoughts ran through it.

"Don't do it," I whispered. "There are too many of them. Reach out. Say the words he needs to hear. Please."

But he could not hear me, and his gaze shifted from the weapons upon the floor to the man standing rimmed in light before him. "Something I want to say?" he said, some of his confidence returning in a flash of pride. "No, Usurper, there is nothing I want to say."

Lifting his chin, Emperor Kin Ts'ai nodded to the executioner.

Only in the slow recall of memory would the moments that followed become clear. At the time, I knew only the furious drumming of my heart and the cry upon my lips. Mother threw herself off the dais, her crimson robe fluttering like the wings of a blood-soaked bird. General Ryoji caught

her. Held her back, screaming, as two of his men gripped Tanaka by the shoulders and forced him down. Silence ruled where there ought to have been outcry. Stillness where there ought to have been movement. Protest. Prayer. Shouts. But Mother was the only one, slamming her fists into the unyielding general. She who had always been so powerful. She who could have moved the world. Powerless.

“No!” the word tore from my throat. “Don’t do this, please!” I ran into the space before the throne no one was allowed to enter. “I beg mercy for my brother. He has been played, fooled by those who claimed to support him. These are not his words. You must have mercy, for whatever he says he is still your son as I am your daughter.”

“A fine move, Miko Otako, but all too late.” It could have been another lesson over the Errant board, another acknowledgement of respect to tuck away for later contemplation. Until, not taking his gaze from mine, Emperor Kin nodded again. A small, sharp move like the bringing down of a blade.

Behind me the thud.

Mother screamed.

I turned as Tanaka’s body sagged between the guards who held him. His head did not roll, just lay upon its cheek, his blue eyes staring at the feet of those who ought to have been his people.

And from the crowd a voice rose.

“Long live Emperor Kin!”

“Long live Emperor Kin!” the court returned, bows rippling through their midst.

## Chapter 11

### Rah

Whispers of war hissed through the camp, but guilt had kept me too close to my sick and injured Swords to pay much heed to our captors' plans. Gam showed no sign of improvement and lay moaning beneath a sheen of sweat. Fessel was little better and both Amun and Hamatet kept neither food nor water in their stomachs.

"We had a few like this when we first arrived too," Memat said, wiping a streak of sick from Hamatet's cheek without seeming to notice she was doing it. "The strange food here still upsets me sometimes."

I took the cloth from her and dunked it in the bucket. "Did they pull through, your Swords?"

"Some of them."

Behind her, Yitti grimaced. He had accepted the continued presence of the Namalaka healer with the same silence he accepted everything else. She came and went along with many other healers, but more often than not in the days following our arrival she could be found kneeling with our wounded or fetching and carrying for Yitti.

"We can only do what we can," he said, turning the cloth on Gam's forehead before returning to the task of crushing omock roots. "Mem, we need—"

"More brittle oil? On it." She bounced up and was off without another word.

“I like her,” Yitti said, smashing the roots.

“She talks as much as you don’t.”

Yitti screwed up his face. “I talk.”

I waited for him to laugh, or even smile, anything to show he was kidding, but he met my stare with such incredulity that I laughed instead. “I’ve known horses who’ve talked more than you.”

His lips twitched. A smile peeked. And when he could hold it back no more, Yitti snickered—a crackly sound full of mirth. It woke Gam who rolled, throwing the cloth off his forehead.

“Ma,” he mumbled. “It’s all right, Ma, it’s all right. It’s all right.” He wailed as though he had rolled onto something sharp before settling into a whimper.

“He’s not good,” Yitti said, all mirth draining from his face. “If this fever doesn’t break soon...”

He left the words unsaid and went back to smashing the omock roots.

From the other side of the fire, someone moaned, and the cauterising iron grated as Tep turned it yet again. He had not ceased his vigil beside the three injured First Swords who might still survive, staying on even when Gideon told him to get some rest. He could have snatched naps, as Yitti did, but the old healer just murmured his prayers and kept working.

“Do you think we should have fought?” I said, giving voice to Juta’s question. It had needled at me since he’d asked it that first night.

“No.” Yitti didn’t hesitate. “They would have killed us.”

The second question sat on my tongue, but as my Swords lay dying around me I could not ask it.

I did not need to. “We ought to have gone home, though,” Yitti said, mindlessly spinning the mortar in its bowl. “In hindsight, that is. Hard to know such things at the time. You were right, then.”

“Just not now?”

He shrugged.

“Would it have been any better at home?”

Yitti’s face twisted up in thought, and his jaw worked as he chewed upon nothing but his answer. Eventually, he shrugged a second time. “That’s a strange question.”

Before I could tell him everything Gideon had said the night we arrived, Memat returned out of breath. “Here.” She thrust an oil flask at Yitti. “Sorry

I took so long. The herd master was asking me questions. He's on his way here now and—"

I stood up. Gideon was striding toward us, receiving salutes from all he passed like a true herd master. Perhaps he was, as strange a herd as we were. Who better than the man who had been here longest?

I stepped away from the sick to greet him, leaving the pungent stink of vomit behind. Hamatet and Amun had both fallen into a doze, but the smell hadn't gone anywhere.

"Herd Master." I pressed my fists and saluted as all the others had.

He grinned and stopped, hands on hips before me. "Well I can't say I hate it," he said as though in answer to a question I hadn't asked. "How is everyone today?"

"No improvement in any of my Swords. But you'll have to ask Memat about the Namalaka and Tep about your own."

"Memat has already given me her report. And informed me there are duties to be done." He glanced toward the neat row of dead Levanti, none mine yet, though there were half a dozen First Swords of the Torin who hadn't survived the night. "Will you keep me company, Brother?"

To be thought so here, now, even after all that had changed and gone wrong, brought comfort to my worried soul. "I would be honoured."

A shrine to Nassus had been built near the stream, its hewn logs rising like fingers from a mound of stones, each one bearing symbols painted in mud. Some were wearing off, but others looked freshly done.

Gideon knelt on the bloodstained grass, while Tep and Memat carried over the first of his fallen Swords. I recognised the woman's face but could not recall her name, though she had been riding with Gideon as long as I could remember. Leaving her body with his captain, Tep returned to the fire but Memat lingered. Gideon might have accepted her help, but I needed him to myself, needed more answers, so I sent her back to Yitti with a smile.

I knelt as Gideon pulled the woman's head into his lap and took out a knife. It wasn't the one he'd always carried, not even Levanti made, but despite its strangely shaped hilt, he handled it with ease, sticking the blade into the back of her neck.

"Torotet rode with the First Swords longer than anyone," he said as her blood spilled onto the grass. "I always assumed she would be doing this for



me one day.” He worked steadily, his grip firm and sure. “Or you would. After challenging me and winning.”

He shot me a sidelong look, half a smile on his lips.

“Challenge my First Sword?” I laughed. “Why?”

Gideon shrugged. “You ought to have the title, being the closest of any of us to a horse whisperer.”

While the people of the city states looked up to their priests and their kings, their scholars and their merchants, Levanti society revolved around horse whisperers. They came from all different herds and lived with none—their knowledge and skill available to all who brought offerings to their groves. Their word was the highest authority. They healed horses; presided over blood givings, challenges, and gatherings; advised on grove management, breeding pairs, and wintering grounds; and when one came to your herd to choose an apprentice, there could be no higher honour.

The hand had felt so heavy as it fell possessively upon my shoulder.

“I never finished the training,” I said.

“No, but you started it.”

“It... wasn’t for me.”

He went on sawing through the flesh of his fallen Sword, globs of blood plopping onto the ground. “I remember.”

In hindsight, the two years I had spent training under Whisperer Jinnit had taught me much, though at the time I was sure it had only taught me that I did not want to be a whisperer. It was rare for apprentices to return, and though Herd Master Sassanji had been disappointed to lose the first potential horse whisperer the Torin had produced in a generation, I had been welcomed back with open arms. It had taken longer than I had thought to readjust to herd life. Without Gideon it would have been impossible.

“Do you blame me for not talking you out of it?” His words broke me from my abstraction, and again they were delivered with an oblique look, as though watching for a reaction. “Your mother would have.”

“She would have tried.”

He laughed. “Yes, perhaps you are right and there’s nothing anyone could have said once you’d made up your mind, but she made me promise to take care of you and that still troubles me sometimes.” He pulled the knife free, the head almost severed. “Ah well, it was all a long time ago. I am confident that when we are finished here, I will have built something for

you that's worthy of her trust in me."

"Finished here? What is going on, Gideon?"

His hands paused in their work and he looked sidelong at me. "I... I can't tell you, Rah, I'm sorry. It is enough of a risk that anyone knows there is a plan at all, that we aren't just dumb brutes who like to kill. That is what the Chiltaens think of us, you know, even the ones who learnt to speak our language did so only to spy on us, not to learn anything about our culture or our people."

"You don't trust me?"

The hum of distant activity filled the silence between us, a silence that stretched so taut it opened a pit in my stomach. Gideon looked back down at the body between his knees.

"I trust you with my life," he said at last. "But not with this. I trust no one with this."

With a last expert slice, Torotet's head came free of her body and Gideon slid his knees out from beneath her shoulders. "We will do a Burning tonight, if I can get the wood. The Chiltaens bury their dead, you know, in the ground. Like they're seeds."

"That seems unwise," I said, accepting his change of subject with stiff pride to conceal the gaping hole his words had left in my heart. "Is it the same ground they live upon? That they grow food upon?"

"It is."

I made a face. "How is the body meant to return to the gods if it is trapped under the ground?"

"Trapped under the ground and being turned into plants to be eaten." He grinned as though nothing had changed between us. "Whisperer Jinnit wouldn't have approved."

"Whisperer Jinnit would have one of his spasm attacks at the mere thought."

Gideon carried Torotet's head to the base of the shrine. I wanted to leave him to it, to escape, but he beckoned me over and I could not disobey. "This is just like when we lost Captain Tallus," he said as I knelt beside him, and by all the gods I wished it was, but when I joined my voice to his for the prayers, it was a Levanti lament sung to a swirling Chiltaen wind.

When it was done, he started on the next body and we Farewelled them too. As he began on the third, Yitti strode over. "One for you, Captain," he

said. “Gam’s gone.” He spoke with a healer’s solemn practicality, but grief pressed his lips to a hard line and he did not meet my gaze. “We’ll bring him over.”

Memat helped him, and kneeling there with Gideon, I prepared to free the soul of another Sword, glad this time a shrine was so close. It wasn’t until I was properly positioned with my knees beneath Gam’s still-warm shoulders that I realised I had no knife. The Chiltaens had taken them and hadn’t given them back.

“Here.” Gideon drew a second from his belt, as equally un-Levanti as the one he was using. I took it with thanks, but it was as strange to the hand as it was to the eye, and I couldn’t but think of his grand tent and his fine food and the Chiltaen words that came so easily to his lips.

“You’re still not very good at this,” Gideon said, pausing to watch me. “You work like you’re afraid to finish. Like you’re worried you’ll hurt them. Be more decisive and strong in your cuts.”

I thrust the knife in with force and blood spurted up my arm. Gideon laughed. “Do you remember your first time? I’d taken you out hunting—you can’t have been more than a saddleboy at the time, or just Made, I can’t recall. And we came across that group of Korune bandits who thought they could take us.”

“They did outnumber us about two to one.”

“Yes, but they’re terrible archers on horseback. Fantastic on the ground, and if they’d been brave enough to dismount with us bearing down on them they might have won, but no.”

“I had never killed anyone before that.”

The head of his third fallen warrior came away from its body. “No, I remember. You were trembling all over like a dog when a storm rolls in. I told you that you had to take the head and you wanted to tell me where I could shove it. After you’d thrown up for the third time.”

“His guts were hanging out!”

Gideon grinned and clapped his hand upon my shoulder. “Damn, but it is good to have you here.”

Despite all my doubts and my questions and the hurt of his distrust, I couldn’t help but agree. I had missed him too much, this man who was brother, father, teacher, and hero.

“Captain!” We both turned. Sett was striding across the mud-churned

grass toward us. “Captain, Legate Andrus needs you. Now.”

Well out of earshot, the same Chiltaen man from the first night stood flanked by a pair of guards, every Levanti keeping well out of their way. Though I knew nothing of the army with which we were camped, something in the extra decoration upon his armour spoke a man more highly ranked than Commander Brutus. He might not have been the man in charge, but he stood like one who was used to people obeying without question.

“All right,” Gideon said, getting up without so much as a beat of hesitation. He handed the severed head to Sett. “This is your task now. Hopefully I will return soon with news.”

“May fortune smile.”

“May it indeed.”

Gideon threw me a quick smile and departed on the words, leaving Sett to kneel beside me. Despite being born of the same womb, Sett lacked Gideon’s easy charm, more prone to scowls than smiles. He said nothing as he freed the fallen First Sword at the shrine and nothing when he took up the knife to begin on the fourth head. Perhaps he was still angry about how close I had come to stabbing that Chiltaen soldier.

Alone, I took Gam’s head to the shrine and sang to free his soul, sending it on its way to the gods as I had been unable to do for Eska or Orun. I blinked back tears when I was finished and would have walked away in silence, but Sett said, “He is going to need your help. Gideon.”

“My help? To do what?”

“To remake our future.”



By afternoon, I returned to the shrine twice more, freeing the souls of both Hamatet and Fessel. Amun clung on under the watchful gaze of Yitti and Memat, and finding myself in the way there, I wandered the camp. My thoughts wandered with me and a vague idea of finding each of my Swords to be sure they were mending well became an aimless meander through the tents being greeted by Levanti at every step.

“Captain Rah!”

I had somehow found myself near the Hoya game and looked around, not sure where my name had come from. The spectators were loud and everywhere, some cheering, others preparing to field a team, and in the buzz of excitement, no one seemed to be looking at me.

“Rah, you dullard!”

Dishiva was waving to me from a group collected around the remains of a cooking fire, each of them sitting upon the ground in the serious manner of a gathered Hand. They each shifted back as I approached, widening the circle enough to accommodate me if I chose to join them. “Rah,” Dishiva said when I drew close. “Come and sit with us.”

“I would not wish to intrude.”

“No intrusion. Rah, this is Captain Atum e’Jaroven, my First Sword.” A middle-aged man with a gentle smile pressed his fists in salute. “Captain Menesor e’Qara and his second, Jaesha e’Qara.” The young second shot me a fleeting smile only to settle back into a scowl, the lines cut into her face so like the ones upon her captain’s that he could have been her father by blood. “And Captains Yiss en’Oht, Taga en’Occha, and Lashak e’Namalaka.” The three women who greeted me with salutes could not have been more different, Yiss an aged warrior with skin like leather, Taga a serious woman with scowling brows, and Lashak young with a bright, welcoming smile.

“I am Captain Rah e’Torin of the Second Swords of Torin,” I said, settling myself in the space they had made for me.

Lashak e’Namalaka laughed. “We all know who you are. We’ve been talking about you.”

I glanced at Dishiva. “That’s... frightening.”

“We were just saying that given the First Swords of Torin have been here three cycles, it is interesting it took so long for you to arrive. Most of us”—she indicated the captains present—“arrived within a few seasons of our herdkin.”

All eyes stuck to me. It had not been much of a question, yet they seemed to want an answer, and despite the honour of sitting with fellow captains, I wished I had refused. When I did not answer, Dishiva filled the void. “We were exiled only a season after the Second Swords of Jaroven.”

“Where is their captain?” I asked, hoping to direct attention away from myself.

Dishiva pointed at the Hoya game. “Luum is a very skilled player. Isn’t

much interested in plans and politics.”

“Is that what we’re discussing here?”

“Merely trying to make some sense out of how we all came to be here,” the leather-skinned Captain Yiss en’Oht said. “I’ve been here longest of all but for Gideon. It’s been a shock watching so many Swordherds arrive, each with their stories of being exiled for not giving way to one or other of the city states or their missionaries. The plains are either cursed, or we are, being spat out one by one.”

“No one has gone back?”

Chuckling circled the ash-choked fire pit. “Look around, boy,” Yiss said. “You see a way out that’s not through a whole army of men who value the dirt more than our lives? Some have died trying though.”

“How long have you been here?”

“A cycle and a half. Not exactly here though, we’ve been moved around a lot. This camp has only been here since the spring.”

Every answer seemed only to beget more questions. The biggest of all swelled in my thoughts before bursting free from my tongue. “Why?”

“Why this camp? War, boy, war.”

“No, why were we all exiled? Why are all our herd masters turning against us?”

A few shoulders sagged. Lashak e’Namalaka shrugged. “We were hoping you might know the answer to that,” she said.

“Me?”

“The Torin were the first here. Now it seems you are also here last. Your arrival felt... significant.”

Captain Menesor e’Qara cleared his throat and adjusted his position on the damp grass. “I don’t think it has anything to do with the Torin,” he said. “It’s just the work of the city states. Look at the herds that are here. The Torin, the Oht, the Bedjuti, the Injit. Namalaka, Sheth, Jaroven, Occha, and Qara. Where are the Topi? The Erraja? The Hatetoth? They aren’t here because their common lands are hard to get to. Traders cannot come to them. Missionaries cannot reach them. They have never taken the brunt of a Korune attack.”

“But how do they gain such control over our leaders?” Dishiva said, leaning in, her eyes alight. “How did these traders and missionaries”—she all but spat the word—“turn our herd masters’ minds to madness?”

Captain Menesor picked up a cold coal and began rubbing it on the sole of his boot. “Ah, if you can answer that, it’ll be more than any of us can, though we’ve sat here and talked it over day in and day out. Whatever it is I don’t want it touching my mind.”

He closed his fingers around the coal, crushing it to black dust only to stand suddenly, wiping his stained hand on even more stained breeches. “Herd Master Gideon,” he said, saluting. The rest of the captains rose in a flurry as Gideon halted beside us. Blood from earlier still crusted the edges of his fingernails.

“No,” he said to Captain Menesor’s invitation to join us. “I must speak to all the Sword captains before nightfall.” Gideon swept us all with his gaze. “The Chiltaens are marching to war against the Kisians to the south, and we are to march with them. They wish to strike quickly before the Kisian Emperor can mount a defence, so tomorrow we ride to take a town called Tian on the border.” He drew a breath but no one interrupted, all eyes fixed on his face. “If you choose to fight, your horses and weapons will be returned to you, but if you use them against a single Chiltaen, then you, and every Sword under your command, will die. They have made this clear.”

“If they’re so afraid we’ll turn on them, then why risk taking us along at all?” Dishiva said.

“Because they need us. With your arrival, Captain, there are now more than two thousand Levanti here. The Chiltaen army is larger and the Kisian army larger still, I am told, but they mostly fight upon the ground, not horseback. A single highly trained Levanti Sword is worth many common soldiers.”

“And what do we get for risking our lives?” Taga en’Occha narrowed her eyes. “Or is it just do it or die?”

Gideon considered her a long moment over the cold fire pit. Nearby, the Hoya game continued as though nothing was changing, each cheer filled with true joy. I envied the absent Captain Luum e’Jaroven that escape.

“I am not asking you to fight for them,” Gideon said at last. “Not asking you to risk your lives and those of your Swords for them. I am asking you to fight for me. You chose me as your herd master, and now I stand before you to promise that *together* we can carve a future for our people, can regain our pride and strength such that no one can take it from us again, but to reach that end, we have to fight for these men.”

“And what future is that?” Dishiva asked, and I was grateful someone else gave voice to my question.

“A future in which we might still be alive,” Captain Atum e’Jaroven said, jabbing a warning finger into her side. “They’ll kill us all if we don’t, you can be sure of that. No need to paint us a pretty story, Herd Master, we are Levanti after all. The Jaroven, at least, are used to fighting merely for survival. There is no shame in that.”

Muttered agreement passed around the circle, and Dishiva scowled at the fire pit like a reprimanded child. Silently, I urged her to press the question, but Gideon saluted his respect to the old Jaroven First Sword, leaving her nothing more to say.

“We must and will survive,” Gideon said. “But I will take no unwilling warriors into battle, so carry my words to your Hands and your Swords. If they want no part of this, they can remain here, but if they fight with us, they will be warriors once more. I will give you time to think, but you must give me your answer by nightfall. I must find the others now.”

He accepted the salutes of all the captains, and as the circle broke up, he beckoned me to walk with him. “Rah,” he said, stopping a little distance away and gripping my shoulders. “You will fight for me, won’t you? You and your Second Swords will ride with us, the Torin together again.”

“I... I don’t know, I haven’t discussed it with my Hand.”

His eyes widened in a flash of fear, there and gone as he lowered his forehead to mine and his voice to a whisper. “This is the only way, Rah. The only way. If there had been another... but there is not.”

I pulled away, needing space to breathe. “Just tell me what you’re planning! How can it help us to fight for the people who beat us, starved us, and marched us in chains? If we are each worth so many of their soldiers, why don’t we turn on them as soon as they give us our weapons? Then we can go home and—”

“Home to what? There is a sickness on the plains, Rah, something evil. We can build here. We can thrive.”

“But—”

“Do you trust me, Rah?”

It had once been such an easy answer, but now the same emptiness that had opened between us before the shrine yawned once more. This Gideon was not the same Gideon I had mourned.



When I did not answer, he gripped my arms and shook me. “Well? Do you?”

“Yes! Yes, of course!”

“Then tell me you will fight for me.”

His desperation filled me with a fear I could not explain, the plea in his voice dragging assurances from my lips like they were bandages to stem a wound. “All right. I will fight for you. You are my First Sword. I will follow where you lead.”

A long sigh deflated him, and he nodded. “Good. Good.”

Without another word, without explanation, without thanks or assurance, he strode off into the busy camp and was soon swallowed.

I repeated his words to Yitti and Kishava—all that were left of my Hand now—and neither spoke for a full minute. “And what is your plan, Captain?” Kishava asked eventually. “Do you really mean to fight for our slave masters?”

“I have said I will. Gideon is our First Sword and I trust him.” There was enough lie in the words to make her gaze hard to meet, though I couldn’t have explained, could only have pointed at the Chiltaen tent and Chiltaen knives and the Chiltaen words, all of which he had reason for. I shrugged rather than try to give voice to the fear I had seen in his eyes. “Perhaps Eska was right and the world is changing.”

“Perhaps.” She turned away, seeming to avoid my gaze as I had avoided hers.

“You don’t think so? You don’t want to fight now?”

“No, Captain. And I don’t understand how so many proud Levanti are allowing themselves to be kept like dogs, happy so long as there is food and water and somewhere to run and rut.”

“You were the first to submit to Commander Brutus.”

“And I was wrong!” Her gaze snapped back to me, her cheeks flushing hot. “I was wrong, all right? Just as I was wrong about you. I wanted you to beat Eska that night because you were the only one who remembered there is wellness of body and wellness of spirit and they are not the same thing. That when one sickens, it does not matter how strong the other, death will follow.”

Again she looked away, somewhere beyond me and beyond this hell. But she had left her barb in my flesh to sting me with its honesty, and I

swallowed hard, fearing the answer yet having to ask the question. “And now?”

“And now I know there is no point fighting for honour, for our code and our spirit, if suffering will be the only price. Now I wish Eska had taken us home.” Kishava got to her feet. “Go, fight for Gideon. Fight for the Chiltaens. But I will have none of it.”

She walked away, and to my shame, I let her go. I let her go because I had no arguments to bring her back, because whatever assurance I had given Gideon, I agreed with everything she had said but could not admit it.

As though he had heard none of our argument, Yitti stared at the ground, chewing his thoughts as he always did. I needed him to say something, anything, and shifted my weight from foot to foot as the seconds dragged on, hardly able to say what answer I most needed him to give. “Fighting in a Chiltaen war will kill many Levanti,” he said at last. “But refusing to fight in a Chiltaen war might kill even more. Either way, I would rather face them with my weapons in my hands, so if this is your decision, I will ride with you. Amun is too sick, but the others are recovering well enough.”

That night, they brought out our swords and returned our horses. The weapons were piled around the fire pits, each pile bearing a crude sketch of our herd symbols. Swords, knives, bows, clubs, javelins—all were gathered, bringing life back to the eyes of those born to fight. It was our only purpose by the laws of our people—to fight, to hunt, to kill, to die.

Yitti took control of our pile so he didn’t have to waste time stitching up Swords for fighting over the best weapons, but it was Juta who brought my old swords back to me.

“Captain.” He saluted as I took them. “I would ride with you.”

“You have not yet been Made, Juta,” I said. “You do not bear our symbol, nor have you a horse.”

“What of Orun’s horse? Or Eska’s?”

His words sent a chill of horror through me. “They still Reside. Their souls have not been freed. You cannot ride their horses for they are still *their* horses.”

“Then Hamatet’s horse. She—”

I lifted my hand. “You cannot ride into battle with us if you have not been Made. That is our code no matter how far from home we are.”

“But, Captain—”

“No, enough. You must stay with Amun and the others.”

Juta turned to walk away, but Gideon blocked his path. “We have a horse the boy can ride.”

“Gideon, it is not—”

“Your captain is right, boy. It is against our code and it would be wrong of any captain to agree to let you fight in such a case, but I am your herd master and I say that this once, such things can be overlooked. We are far from home and we all need something to fight for. To live for.”

I pursed my lips, annoyed he would interfere without a word to me first. But too many people were watching to say so. “If it is your command, First Sword,” I said. “It is. The boy can fight tomorrow, and then we will make him a man.”

Stopping only to receive my permission, Juta went with Gideon, following at his heels like a newborn foal. I watched them go, wondering whether the boy would regret his choice when the heedless sword of death fell amongst us in battle.

Jinso awaited me in the pens, and my heart leapt at the sight of him whole and healthy. His coat had not been brushed nor his saddle removed, and the braiding in his mane was an irretrievable mess, but tears pricked my eyes as he bent his head to mine. I let out a long breath, running my hand down his neck and drinking in his warmth and his scent. A yearning for home surged, but I swallowed it down hard and unstrapped his saddle, intent on checking him over before we rode out. Orun would have been livid at the state of him, would never have let this happen, but Orun wasn't here anymore.

“Don't worry,” I said to Jinso as I checked him for sores. “I will never let anyone take you from me again.”

When we gathered around the fires for the evening meal, we found that only the First Swords of Sheth and the Third Swords of Namalaka refused to fight. They sat aside from the rest of us that night, yet caught up in the strange sense of celebration that engulfed the rest, it was easy to believe in Gideon's future. Easy to believe that everything would be all right in the end.

Until Yitti found Kishava hanging from one of the trees near the far palisade fence. And amid cheers and laughter and lifted song, I offered my fourth soul back to the gods.

## Chapter 12

### Miko

I owned no finer robe. Black silk fish swam through a black silk sea, and on its sleeves, embroidered prayers ran shoulder to wrist in black thread. Even the sash had black bands slashing the crimson, though the Ts'ai dragon still appeared to claw its way through blood, its golden threads winking in the lantern light.

Outside, priests chanted, and an endless stream of footsteps came and went as people left folded prayers on the steps, but inside the sanctuary, silence reigned. Mama knelt at Tanaka's side. She had not changed her clothes. She had not moved. Had not spoken. No one had been allowed to touch him, not even to clean the blood from his skin.

A priest entered—a Chiltaen priest in a grey shapeless gown, though not of high enough rank for his face to be covered. Without glancing at either living occupant of the room, he went straight to Dom Leo Villius, laid out on the opposite side of the altar. His eyes were still open, staring and yet unseeing. The priest shivered as he placed a wooden disk on the dead man's chest and went out again without saying a word.

I risked a glance at Mama, kneeling on the other side of Tanaka's body. His corpse. A hard word to think but I forced myself to use it, forced myself to look at the space between his head and his neck and tell myself he was dead. Tanaka, my twin, my best friend, my everything. Dead and gone and never coming back.

I was alone.

A swarm of if-onyms crammed my head. If only I had stopped him. If only I had gone after him. If only I had known the right words to stay His Majesty's hand. If only... But it was done. He had challenged and failed and died for it. And if I were not smarter, I would suffer the same fate.

Tears filled my heart, but I could not let them reach my eyes. I had lost my brother this day, but it was not safe to grieve. Not yet. Not in this gasp of air before the onrushing storm.

Across from me, my only remaining ally stared, glassy-eyed, at the body of her son.

"Mama?"

She didn't move.

"Mama?"

Nothing.

"What is going to happen now?"

She did not look up. Her imperial headdress lay discarded upon the floor, leaving her hair to fall over her shoulders, sweat-tangled and clumped with blood.

"Mama?"

"What is going to happen now?" she repeated at last, not looking up. "I am going to kill my husband. And then I am going to kill myself. And there it will end."

Her words opened a gaping hole in my stomach. "Mama—"

"I should have done it a long time ago. I should have killed him when he was weak, should have taken the risk." Her eyes hadn't left Tanaka's body. Outside, the priests went on chanting. "But I was too afraid of losing everything, and now I have lost anyway."

"You have not lost." I edged closer on my knees. "We still have support. We can fight. We—"

Mama looked up, her eyes bright with a manic light. "Why? My son is dead."

So loudly did she speak that the priests outside broke off, only to continue their chant louder than before. I let go a shuddering breath. "Your son would not want you to give up."

"The dead want nothing."

She looked back at Tanaka. Lifeless. Dead. I reminded myself again that

it was done and could not be undone. Time later to grieve. Time later to regret and question and fear.

“That cannot be it,” I said. “We cannot just give up. We cannot just lie down and do nothing. We can still fight. We can—”

“For what? Tanaka is dead!”

“But I am still here!”

The chanting priests once more wavered and increased their volume, but Mama did not shout back. She just met my gaze with a dead stare, before looking down again, her hands clasped upon her knees.

I rose in a flurry of black silk and strode to the door, hoping she would speak, would call me back. She did not. I stepped out into the night, sandals crushing paper prayers. The folded lotus flowers not only covered the sanctuary step but spilled out into the courtyard, trailing away toward the gates like a path to the heavens. So many prayers to guide my brother’s way. So many who claimed to be loyal to the Otako name yet had been too afraid to stand with him when he needed them most.

Yin awaited me in my rooms, the maid hurriedly withdrawing her hand from Shishi’s ears as I slid the door closed. She leapt up and bowed. “Your Highness, I apologise, I was—”

“Keeping my best friend company,” I said. “For which you are not only forgiven but thanked. I need you to do some more things for me now.”

“Anything, Your Highness.”

I stilled, thinking fast. I had been all motion since leaving the sanctuary, all anger and grief and fear, and I needed to swallow that down and think through my next moves like an Errant player, not just leap into play with half-formed plans.

But I did not have long. He could be already making his move.

*First lesson in battle is not to dither at the opening. Move a piece before your enemy moves it for you.*

“I need this knot retied.”

I gestured to my sash and her brow creased as she hunted something amiss with it. “If you wish, Your Highness. Is it too tight?” She started to untie her earlier work.

“No,” I said. “I want you to tie it in the imperial knot.”

She paused, her hands shaking. “But Your Highness, an imperial knot is only allowed to be worn by—”

“Just do it.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Her fingers flexed before setting to work, though with far less practised movements than usual. When she had finished, I dared not look down at the knot lest it steal my resolve. “Now the golden hairpins,” I said, staring straight ahead. “You know the style.”

She nodded, and standing on a stool so she could see her handiwork, Yin created a crown of golden pins and jewelled combs, each needing to be set twice for how fiercely her hands trembled.

When at last it was done, she stared at the floor. Perhaps she guessed what was coming, for when I asked her to fetch my knives, she did not flinch. With care, she tucked the knife belt beneath my sash so only their hilts protruded. A short summer cloak hung just low enough to hide them from sight, and while Yin tied it around my neck, I watched clouds creep across the moon. Silence reigned. The death drums out in the city had ceased their tattoo an hour ago, their every thud like that of Tanaka’s head hitting the floor.

I could not let mine follow. Would not.

“One last job before you retire for the night,” I said when Yin stepped back.

“Whatever I can do to serve, Your Highness.”

“Go to the stables and have Shijo saddled. Quietly.”

That made her look up. “But, Your Highness, you are not leaving?”

“Not if I can help it. But if today has taught me anything, it is that one must be prepared, just in case things go wrong. Now go quickly and say nothing.”

She bowed, ready to depart.

“No, wait.”

“Your Highness?”

I set my hand upon Shishi’s head, tousling her ears. She nuzzled my hand, her tail hanging low as though she knew what I was about to say. “After you have been to the stables, take Shishi to Edo. I believe the Duke of Syan hired a house on the High Road for the duration of his visit. He shouldn’t be too hard to find if you ask around. Tell him...” My hand stilled upon Shishi’s fur. “Tell him to look after her for me and that I hope I can rely upon his support and that of his father. Tell him to bring her back to me

when the time is right.”

Yin bowed again though her lips twisted. “As you wish, Your Highness.”

I knelt before Shishi and she licked my nose. “I am going to miss you, my friend. I do not know what is coming, but Edo will look after you.” I had so much more to say, but she needed no words, only the touch of my hand as we parted, and though I promised I would see her again, the knowledge it could be a lie tore at my heart.

A heart that broke anew as she padded out of the room at Yin’s side, leaving me alone.

My resolve might have broken then, might have crumbled had I stayed and wallowed, had I looked around and let grief seep in from a space full of memories, but I did not linger. Could not. I checked my blades and took to the passage, my sandals snapping furiously all the way to Emperor Kin’s apartments. There, two imperial guards watched my approach.

“I will see His Majesty,” I said with as much assurance as I could muster.

“His Majesty does not wish to be disturbed, Your Highness,” one of the guards said. “Perhaps tomorrow—”

“Now. Ask him—no. Tell him that I will see him.”

For a moment both hesitated, sharing the worried look of men who had signed up in years of peace and were unprepared for years of war. Then one of them bowed. “Your Highness,” he said before sliding the double doors open just enough to step inside. Words followed, muffled by the screens, but when the guard returned, he nodded. “He will see you, Your Highness.”

Each gripping a handle, they slid the doors wide, and keeping my cloak tight about me, I stepped in.

Despite his rank, Emperor Kin’s apartments were sparse, owning little decoration but for a few watercolours and maps upon the walls. A table, some chests, a scroll rack, and a lap table made up the entire contents of the room—not a single vase or statue or screen, not even silk-covered cushions for the floor.

The remains of a meal sat upon the table, but of the emperor there was no sign. I stood alone, fists clenched in the middle of the matting, trying to ease the sense that I had marched into a lion’s den. But no number of deep breaths seemed capable of slowing the panicked thud of my heart. “Your



Majesty?” I said, before I could think better of it.

“Lady Otako.” He entered from another room, his gait uneven. A single sharp eye assessed me. “What do you want?”

No apology. No excuse. No explanation. Lesson five—gods were never wrong.

“I will be your heir.”

Without eyebrows, surprise was hard for him to show, but his lips parted in a brusque laugh. “Will you indeed? What makes you think so?”

“Because you made many enemies in the north today. If you choose Cousin Bachita, there will be civil war within the year and you know it. You need an heir who can unite not divide, or Kisia will be overrun by Chiltæ. Or anyone else who chose to take advantage of our weakness.”

Amusement twitched his scarred lips. “And you are less divisive, daughter of Katashi Otako?”

“I am a Ts’ai. Which, as you said, is what I ought to have built my campaign around in the first place. Lesson three.”

A flicker of surprise lit his face, there and gone as a bitter laugh filled the space between us. “Ah, someone listens, but unfortunately, that might have been true yesterday, or even this morning, right up to the moment your brother loudly proclaimed his proud Otako heritage to the entire court. *Usurper* was your father’s favourite name for me too.”

“I am not my brother. And I am not my father.”

He began to pace slowly, his hands clasped behind his back and the hem of his imperial robe catching on the matting. “That is certainly of benefit to your cause, but tell me, Miko, are you really planning to kill me if I refuse? Oh, don’t look so surprised. I was a soldier before I was an emperor. People walk differently when they’re carrying a weapon, especially one they wish to conceal.”

I drew back one side of my cloak, displaying the two knife hilts at my waist. “They aren’t for you. After so many attempts on my life, I would be foolish not to protect myself, don’t you think?”

“If I wanted you dead, I’d have ordered it done already.”

“Yes, I know.” I had grown up believing in the protective strength of my mother’s power, sure her influence was all that kept us alive, but today Tanaka had died and she had been powerless. I swallowed the lump that came to my throat. “All those assassins you sent after us, you weren’t really

trying, were you? You just wanted Mama to be afraid. Wanted us all to be afraid.”

His eye narrowed, squeezed by a lowered brow. “You’ve inherited your grandfather Lan’s shrewdness, I see. Your mother got only his pride. I wouldn’t have been sorry if one of them had succeeded, but no, I wasn’t really trying. And then I stopped having to even put on the show because your mother started doing it for me.”

My breath caught on his words. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, little Miko, that I haven’t ordered an attempt on your life for almost two years. That man on the road? Well, let’s just say your mother had a particular image of me she needed to sell to her northern supporters.”

The assassin at the inn. Such a public place. And he had never really tried to kill Tanaka at all. I stared at Emperor Kin, every refutation dying on my lips. Mother had always said there was nothing she wouldn’t do to achieve her ends, but not even her greatest detractors would have believed her capable of attacking her own children.

“Her Chiltaen allies loved the show,” he went on when I found no words. “She has always been good at making grand scenes to sway hearts and minds.”

The very Chiltaen allies she must have already planned to sell me to. Anything to get Tanaka his throne. “What about your Chiltaen allies?” I said, my mind reeling. “You were working with them too.”

“I wanted a treaty, yes, but peace never wins when war is already in play. Her war. You were the assurance she paid her new allies, while Tanaka was the salve she offered to the northern battalions when she ordered them to turn a blind eye to Chiltaen raids. Oh yes, she was behind that too. All so everyone would think I was too full of hate to take proper care of my empire. That I was too old. Too weak. Too bitter. That I had to be destroyed.”

And he had let her do it. Had let her move her pieces, let her lay her trap, no doubt planning to turn it all against her. But it had caught Tanaka. Tanaka who had drunk it all in and stood up for the empire he loved, believing every word she had said. My heart broke anew, the cracking of it shuddering the length of my body from the soles of my sandals to the tips of my golden pins. In her own way, Mama had killed him herself. Her own son.

I wiped away a tear with the back of my hand. Next to Tanaka, I had meant nothing to her.

*I am saying that for your brother's sake, you must seize the chance before you. There is no other way.*

"Tanaka left me no choice, you know."

I looked up. "No choice? You could have—"

He lifted his nonexistent brows. "Could have...? If you want to rule, you have to think like an emperor, girl," he said, and though I wanted to believe kindness softened his voice, his expression made it a lie. "If I had arrested Tanaka, he would have become a rallying point for treason. If I had done nothing, he would now be sitting upon the Crimson Throne, I would be dead, and Chiltae would be taking full advantage of your mother's poor judgement. War is coming. It has been coming for a long time, and it's a war only I can win. Your mother knows nothing but her own pain. Whatever power she may have garnered at court, I alone have ruled Kisia's armies all these years. It is fear of the Soldier Emperor that has kept us safe this long."

Fear of him. It had taken only a nod. A nod and my brother had died, my dream of freedom with him. I swallowed the tears, standing proud. "They can learn to fear me too."

Emperor Kin clasped his misshapen hands behind his back and eyed me with cold appraisal. "They already have reason to. One of your grandfathers assassinated the other. Your father tried to burn down the empire with witchcraft. Your brother just declared treason, and your mother left us open to attack simply to hurt my reputation as a military leader—the one place she had not yet managed to hit me. The Otako name, you see, is not well known for its... wisdom and honour."

"But I am not my brother. I am not my father," I repeated. "And I am not my mother."

"No, but you are the bastard daughter of a traitor."

"One man's traitor is another man's hero. You of all people should know that."

His smile did not reach his eyes. "And one man's madman is another's prophet?"

"Something of the sort, yes."

Again he regarded me, his single-eyed gaze intense like a flame. I

returned it though I wanted to look away, stood my ground though I wanted to run, and maintained a slight smile though I wanted to tear out his throat. Not the time for grief. Not the time for revenge. Not yet.

“How very fortunate Leo Villius would have been had you taken a liking to him rather than wanting him dead,” he said at last.

“I did not want him dead. I just didn’t want to be sent away. This is my home. My empire. I would serve Kisia with my life, not Chiltae.”

A small smile flickered on his lips and my heartbeat sped with hope. Hope I hated myself for. Whatever my mother’s hand in it, this man had killed my brother.

Not now.

“Well, Miko Ts’ai,” he said. “Your proposition is... interesting.”

I noted his use of my former name. “Interesting?”

“You’ll have to forgive me for having not had time to consider it properly yet. Perhaps—”

Footsteps sounded in the passage, and I wanted to scream for them to go away. He had been listening to me, speaking to me as though I were an equal, his words peeling away layer upon layer of deceit. The chance of a new future had just begun to burn in my heart, but in the space of a breath, the doors opened and Mother stood on the threshold with a blackened bow in her hands. Neither guard stopped her nocking an arrow.

Emperor Kin spread his arms in welcome. “So poetic,” he said. “I thought that thing buried.”

“No, but you soon will be,” she said, her focus solely on him. “He was my son!”

“But not mine.”

She howled, the weapon shaking in her hands as tears spilled down her cheeks. “I should have done this a long time ago,” she said, preparing to draw. At that distance, she wouldn’t even have to aim.

“So too should I. Captain!”

The doors to Kin’s sleeping room slid, and half a dozen imperial guards spilled out, boots crunching reeds. Two nocked their own bows, silent and unflinching as they aimed at their empress, while the others held hands to undrawn daggers. “Drop the bow, Your Majesty,” Captain Lassel said as one might speak to a furious child. It could have been a request but for all the words left unsaid. To threaten the emperor was treason. The penalty for

treason was execution. Even for an empress.

Had I the chance to live the moment again, I might have seen those thoughts turn behind her eyes, might have seen the instant when grief overran all. Her hold upon the bow tightened, her fingers whitening upon its charred grip. Again my future stood a moment from tumbling. Emperor Kin had been listening to me.

“No!” I charged at her, no time to even pray that neither she nor the guards would hit me. Someone must have drawn though, have pulled their shot, for a paper pane snapped as we hit the floor. But no pain came, no impact threw me, only Mother in a tangle of silk struggling to be free.

“Stupid girl! Get off,” she hissed, thrusting me away, but another hand wrenched me to my feet.

“Do not touch me, Captain,” Mother snarled. “I am your empress.”

“You need to come with us, Your Majesty,” the captain said as I regained my balance, all Yin’s hard work coming to a messy end in a tumble of loosened hair.

Mother laughed. “Come with you? So you can lock me up?” Tears streaked her cheeks and her diminutive figure trembled with rage. “He killed my son!” She jabbed a finger at His Majesty. “His heir. That is the real treason.”

Wild blonde hair cascaded loose around her head, catching on damp lips, and though she carried none of her usual poise, she was far more frightening. Captain Lassel and his men stood between her and Emperor Kin, but they might as well have not been there, so intently did Kisia’s emperor and empress stare at one another, no kindness in either’s eyes, no forgiveness, just hate and hurt and anger.

“Mama,” I said, taking a hesitant step toward her. “Don’t do this. Tanaka —”

My twin’s name acted as a catalyst. She threw herself at the barrier of guards, spitting screams, silk tangling about her legs as she kicked and clawed. “My son!” she said, the words rising to a wail of rage. “I hate you. I *hate* you! My mother, my father, my brothers—you have taken everything from me. I want you to die slowly so I can take joy in every moment.”

The guards barred her path, unbending before her abuse.

“Mama, please—”

With a final wail, she sank to her knees and rocked back and forth,

clutching her arms to her chest as though cradling the child she could never hold again. The sight tore at my heart. She had always loved Tanaka best. She had tried to sell me to the Chiltaens for an army to ensure his future, risking war in the process. Yet the Dragon Empress was still my mother. “Please don’t do this,” I said. “We can—”

She sprang like a golden-haired wolf and slapped me, sending me reeling back, cheek smarting. “How dare you take his side? You know nothing! Nothing! He could be dead already but for you.”

“And Tanaka might still be alive but for you!” My hands flew to my mouth as though they could force the words back in, but it was too late.

Her jaw dropped, but before she could retort, more footsteps came along the passage and General Ryoji appeared in the open doorway, four guards at his back.

“Ah, Ryoji, I am surprised it took you so long,” Emperor Kin said from behind his wall of protectors. “Is this your first act of atonement for obeying my orders? It won’t bring the boy back. Or make her love you as much as you surely deserve after so many years of devotion.”

General Ryoji ignored this, staring instead at Captain Lassel—the enemy in the same uniform. “Stand down, Captain,” he said. “Those are my orders.”

“I’m afraid I take my orders from the emperor, General,” the man said. “His Imperial Majesty is the highest authority in the empire.”

“Until he is a traitor to his own people.”

“There is only one traitor here.”

Emperor Kin spoke from behind his protective wall. “General Hade Ryoji, you are henceforth removed from your position as commander of the Imperial Guard, effective immediately. *General* Lassel, arrest Her Majesty even if you must kill five traitors to do so.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Satisfaction sounded in Lassel’s voice, but as he stepped toward my mother, her gaze slipped from him to the guard on his flank. Lassel must have seen it too. He started to turn, and the blade meant for his back plunged into his side. With brutal efficiency, it was twisted and wrenched free, spilling blood over the matting.

“I want him alive!” Mother shouted as Ryoji advanced into the fray. “Get out of the way, Miko. This has nothing to do with you.”

“No!” I stepped in front of Ryoji, but it was to Mother I spoke. “You aren’t listening to me,” I said. “You cannot kill him. You cannot arrest him. You invited the Chiltaen threat, but do you really want them to destroy us? Kisia needs him, Mama.”

“Kisia has never needed him,” she snarled with spittle and fury. “He just made us think it did. Now he has pushed too far and his reign has ended. His life is done.”

“You will not hold the empire if you take it like this,” I said.

“He is not your father.”

“I know.”

“He killed your brother!”

“I know!”

Behind me, Emperor Kin’s breaths rasped in and out through tortured lips. I had never meant to stand between them. Had never dreamed I would.

“If you take his side, you are dead to me,” Mama said. “Do not for a moment think I don’t mean it. Step aside, Miko.”

“No.”

Her lips set in a grim line. “Arrest them both.”

As he had in the throne room, General Ryoji paused for an instant, but only an instant, his gaze sliding over me as though he had never spent hours teaching me the art of sword and dagger and bow, as though he had never been entrusted with my safety, as though I was no one. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

Ryoji had more men, but there was a whole castle out there—we just had to make it to the door. Adjusting my sweaty grip upon my dagger I stood my ground as the general approached. “Get His Majesty out of here,” I said, not turning, only hoping Mother’s insidious reach had not infiltrated more of the emperor’s loyal men. Behind me, boots scuffed on the matting, and as the only true barrier between two raging forces, I sidestepped toward the door, glaring at Ryoji, daring him to cut me down. “If you think I won’t fight, then you’re a fool,” I said, talking to buy time. “And if you think she won’t mind both her children being dead, then you’re an even bigger fool.”

“And if you think you can protect him, then you’re as big a fool as I am, Your Highness,” he said, matching me step for step, the men at his back licking their lips, their eyes darting past me to their emperor. “You think we are the only ones? He might reign in the throne room, but he can’t hide

behind imperial ceremony here. Justice must be done.”

We reached the door, and as I stepped back through the aperture, Emperor Kin shouted for more guards. “Yes, it must,” I said. “But at the right time. And never at the cost of the empire.”

Footsteps came running along the passage.

“Goodbye, General.”

Something of a smirk twisted his lips as fighting erupted behind me. I dared not turn, dared not risk even a glance with General Ryoji and his men following me into the passage, their blades drawn.

“He’s never going to make it out of the castle alive, Miko,” Mama said from Ryoji’s side. “Accept the inevitable. Don’t let him trick you as he tricked Tanaka.”

“*He* tricked Tanaka?” I said. “It was your anti-Chiltaen propaganda that he drank in and spat back out. All your whispers of glory, all your belief in the divine right of Otakos.”

Trying to hold in tears, I backed along the passage in Kin’s wake, the fight ahead of him coming to me through short gasps and grunts and clashes of steel on steel, through breaking screens and the thud of bodies hitting the floor. For every step General Ryoji took forward, I took one back, holding my dagger out to keep him at bay.

“You can’t keep this up all the way out of the castle,” General Ryoji said, his expression set in hard, unreadable lines. This man I had thought my ally. “Step aside.”

“No.”

We passed the court gong. Sounded enough times, it would summon everyone—lords and ladies, councillors and secretaries, and every guard not locked to a post upon the walls. Its mallet hung beside it. No one was allowed to touch it except at the emperor’s orders—the least of my problems now.

I snatched the mallet from its hook, but as I swung, Mama lunged. She tried to wrench it from my hand and I yanked it back. “Idiot, girl,” she snarled. “You think you can trust a single thing that snake of a man says?”

“Like I can trust what you say?” I tried to twist it from her grip. “You blamed him for all the Chiltaen raids you ordered. You blamed him for the marriage you planned for me. You hired that assassin on the road. How much of the Dragon Empress is a lie? You even pretended to be sick to gain



pity, and you know what, Mama? I do pity you. Your scheming killed the child you loved most in the world, and you only have yourself to blame.”

I kicked the gong, the clang of a wooden sandal on metal striking a harsh note through the passage. It slackened Mama’s grip and I yanked free the mallet to hammer the gong hard, again and again, not forming a single dignified tone but a panicked alarm that drowned all other sound. As it faded, I brandished the mallet at my mother, her face red and tears standing in her eyes. “You might have the support of the guards, but how about the court?” I said. “How about the emperor’s councillors? His secretaries. His servants. How many people do you want to witness this coup of yours?”

Hissed words passed between Mama and Ryoji as the castle woke from slumber, forcing an uncomfortable truce upon the divided guards that stood in the emperor’s path. Behind me, Emperor Kin said, “What are you doing?”

Without turning, I replied, loud enough that all might hear. “Eyes are always watching—guards, servants, commoners, lords. It doesn’t matter what we do; someone sees it. This time we want them to see.” I emphasised the *we* though it hurt to say. “There is nothing wrong with Emperor Kin Ts’ai heading out into the city,” I said. “Perhaps he just needs a procession.”

“Yes,” Emperor Kin said. “Come, Miko. Walk with me to the Sanctuary to honour your brother’s name.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” I dropped the mallet and turned my back on my mother, trusting in that moment she would not strike me down.

No blade split my shoulders or dug into my side, no arrow or club, not even words, though I walked with the man she called Usurper. A dozen dead soldiers bled their loyalty upon the floor, but Emperor Kin did not stop. Owning more strength than I had seen for many years, His Majesty strode, almost fully upright, along the corridor. Ahead of him, some dozen guards, and behind him—me.

From doors and passages all through the castle, the court emerged, one unfamiliar lord not having even donned his robe, so desperate had been my ringing of the gong. No one asked His Majesty where he was going or why they had been called, but all bowed as he passed and many fell in behind us. Mama followed too, but somewhere along the way, General Ryoji disappeared. That there might be more plans worried me, but all we had to do was make it out of the castle.

Curious voices filled the lantern-lit passage. At the top of a narrow stairway, a glut of servants stared out at our passing, laundry maids and churnboys, manservants and cooks, even the smith's ungainly lad. They froze at the sight of their emperor and bowed as best they could, all crammed together in the narrow opening.

"Leave your work," Kin said, pausing a moment to address the very lowest of his people. "Prince Tanaka's memory requires a procession. Walk with us."

Amid gasps and murmurs, they filed out to mingle with the court as Emperor Kin Ts'ai, first of his name, strode on along the passage, his robe swirling with each step.

From the upper halls and on down the broad stairway, more and more souls joined the emperor's growing procession, all bowed heads and silent prayers. It broke my heart that they thought they were honouring Tanaka, when really they were saving the life of the man who'd executed him.

By the time we stepped out of the castle, its hall was full of people, all silent but for the small sounds that prove life—a rustle of clothing, a cough, a sniff, and shuffling steps on stone.

Though the sun had long since set, lanterns filled the main courtyard, and just inside the inner gates, the imperial sanctuary hummed with voices lifted in song. The folded prayers left for Tanaka led from it like a painted path, and despite the late hour, high-born families and rich merchants from the city were still bringing more. But standing before the open gates like rocks in a river of wary mourners, General Ryoji and a dozen of his guards blocked the way.

"Ah, Ryoji," His Majesty called as we descended the stairs and crossed the courtyard, the worn stones still exuding the day's heat. "I will not need an armed escort upon my pilgrimage."

"Pilgrimage, Your Majesty?"

People poured from the castle behind us, silent watchers of history.

"To Kuroshima, Hade, to mourn the loss of Prince Tanaka."

Every muscle in the general's face tightened, and though he did not grip the hilt of his sword, his fingers clenched. No doubt my mother had given him orders to make sure neither I nor the emperor escaped the castle, but how could he stand under the gaze of so many and commit treason?

"Have my horse saddled. Her Highness's horse as well."

This was going further than I had planned or even considered. Mother ought to have listened. Ought not to have forced my hand. He had been ready to accept me as his heir. How simple then, how elegant an end.

“Her Highness seems to have predicted the need, as her horse is already saddled,” Ryoji said, a hint of gritted teeth about the words. “Though perhaps a palanquin would be more appropriate for a solemn pilgrimage.” His gaze lifted over my shoulder as he spoke. Upon the castle stairs stood Mama, surrounded by kneeling servants. Lit from above, her hair was like flame swirling atop her head.

“Saddle Roku,” Kin said. “Do not question your emperor.”

Ryoji bowed, though not as deeply as he ought. “Of course not, Your Majesty.” Without turning his head, he said, “Tastan, have the grooms saddle His Majesty’s horse.”

“Yes, General.”

A false smile turned Ryoji’s lips then. “We will not keep you waiting long, Your Majesty,” he said. “Do allow me to take that bow for you. You would not wish to take such a thing upon a pilgrimage.”

I had not realised he was carrying it, that it had not been merely shadows falling upon him. “I take it in honour of its heir,” he said, speaking loud enough that perhaps even Mama might have heard him. He held it out to me. Without thinking, I took it, closing my fingers around its smooth neck. “There are some things that should never be forgotten.”

Through the open doors of the castle, more members of the court trickled out. Though I knew almost every one of them by sight, I could focus on none, my attention skittering. My restless hands plucked at the string of the blackened bow.

General Ryoji must have noticed, for he broke the tense silence to say, “Take care with that, Your Highness.”

“Why?”

“Because it once belonged to Katashi Otako. Some say the evil of the man lives on in its heart.”

Not the words of an Otako loyalist, and yet... his gaze flittered again to my mother.

A hurried groom emerged from the stables leading two horses, but General Ryoji did not move out of the way. “Step aside, Hade,” His Majesty ordered.

“I can’t do that.”

“Then let us try this again.” He lifted his voice so all might hear. “General Hade Ryoji, you are henceforth removed from the position of commander of the Imperial Guard, effective immediately. Until a new general can be appointed, the job will fall to Captain Ling, now Acting-Commander Ling.” Lowering his voice once again, His Majesty hissed, “I’ve wanted to do that for a long time. You ought to have remembered that as I lifted you up, I could drop you back down. Now step aside, I really must go.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. You must.”

General Ryoji closed the gap with a step. His blade darted for the emperor’s chest, aimed upward to slice as many vital organs as possible, but Kin turned with unexpected speed and the blade sank into expendable flesh.

One single moment of stillness remained as blood dripped between the two men, then all was chaos. Calls of treason. Rushing guards. Someone cried out Tanaka’s name, and a blade whirled toward me. I ducked. It skimmed my hair and I came up ripping my dagger from its hidden scabbard. With the blackened bow in one hand and my dagger in the other, I once more stepped before the emperor, my arms thrown wide. “Stop! Mama! I will die before I let you do this.”

“Stop!”

Everyone froze, the guards once more caught with heaving chests and lifted blades, eyes darting uneasily to the figure upon the stairs, her hand uplifted. Over the top of hundreds of still watchers, she said, “Kin Ts’ai is a traitor to the empire he claims to serve. For over thirty years, he has sat upon the throne as a usurper, but tonight that ends, and we return Otako blood to the Crimson Throne. Step aside now, my daughter, that justice might be done upon the man who broke the divine line of emperors.”

I stood, pinned between them, all eyes upon me, all breaths held as I met Mama’s gaze over the heads of many. In front of me the Dragon Empress who had sold not only me but the empire for her son’s future, and behind me the Dragon Emperor who had killed my brother, but who could save Kisia from a war we could not afford to lose.

Tears blinded me as I shook my head. “No. This is not what Tanaka would have wanted.” *It is exactly what Tanaka would have wanted.* “Tastan, bring our horses.”

“Move aside, Miko,” Mama said, her voice steel.

“This is not the way to get what you want,” I shouted over the crowd. “This is the path to a war within as surely as without, and if you must fight on two fronts, you will lose everything. Did you not teach me that the right choice is rarely the easy choice?”

Mother drew herself up, and standing proud atop the stairs, she looked every bit the part she played. “Arrest the Usurper, General Ryoji,” she said, not seeming to care how many witnessed the enactment of her revenge.

“If you want him,” I said, “then you have to go through me.”

Without hesitation, Mama’s voice rang loud. “Do it, General.”

Blood splattered and grim, Ryoji approached me, once more standing between him and the emperor. “You can still change your mind, Your Highness. You do not understand all there is to know.”

“And you understand nothing but what my mother tells you,” I snapped, brandishing my drawn dagger.

He spread his arms to show he meant me no harm, despite the sword in his hand. So many mornings had we trained together, so many hours spent hacking at him with a wooden blade, so many arrows loosed, so many childish complaints I’d levelled at his head, but this wasn’t a morning session in the courtyard. If I stepped aside, Emperor Kin would die. If I held my ground, he would live. Kisia would live. The Kisia Tanaka and I had once wanted to rule together without the divisions of the past.

Until Mother’s hissing tongue had turned his heart.

“No,” I said, my voice cracking. “I will not be ruled by hate and vengeance.”

“He killed Tanaka.”

“I know!” I spat at him, gripping the dagger hilt tighter to keep my hand from shaking. Tears spilled down my cheeks, but I held my ground.

“She won’t get away with this, Hade,” Kin spoke from behind me, his calm far exceeding my own. “You know that. Grief has forced her into the open, but the people won’t take kindly to her treason. Miko speaks the truth.”

“As you spit only lies,” Ryoji snarled, and a snarl it was, his lips drawn back to show bared teeth. “I will not fight for a man who disgraced his oath and his name and every shred of honour he once possessed.”

“But you will fight for a woman who thinks only of the divinity of her

blood line and treats all others as goods to be used or traded? What will become of you, I wonder, when your usefulness runs out? Tastan! The horses!”

The shaking groom stepped forward to help Emperor Kin mount.

“What are you waiting for, General?” Mother shrieked from atop her throne of stairs. “Do not let them escape!” And with his face a mask, General Ryoji lunged. His hand closed around my arm, but even as he jerked me aside, I dropped the black bow and tore my second dagger free of its scabbard with my off hand. I had stabbed him plenty of times with the dull point of a training blade, but nothing could have prepared me for the thick, meaty feel of a blade cutting through cloth, through skin, and burying itself inside a body made of flesh and blood.

Ryoji staggered back, gripping the bloody puncture, and in one movement, I snatched up the blackened bow and leapt into the saddle.

“Stop the traitors!” General Ryoji shouted as I gathered my reins. “Do not let them out of the castle.”

“Go!” Kin’s voice cut clear through the erupting noise and the imperial guards still loyal to their emperor rallied, trying to form a protective ring to shield us from the bloodbath. But it was chaos, every enemy in the same uniform as years of division spilled guts upon the stones.

“Miko! Come!”

Shijo’s hooves clattered upon the stones, all but drowning out the clash of blades, the shouts, the cries—even the screams of the nobility trapped in the mayhem. Mama had not moved from the steps, her gaze caught not to the fighting, not to me, but to the man even now speeding his black stallion out through the inner gates. One was beginning to close as the warning gong sounded overhead.

“Run!” General Ryoji shouted, appearing from the bloodshed to smack the flat of his blade to Shijo’s rump. She whinnied, and as she sped from walk to canter, I could do nothing but hold tight with my knees. I turned back only once but could not see him. Could not see Mother. Could only see the wall of protection Acting-Commander Ling and his men maintained in our wake. Until a spear appeared through the man’s chest. His body juddered like a stuck pig, but when the spear was ripped free, he stayed upright a moment as though habit kept him standing, as though even in death he would serve his emperor.

## Chapter 13

### Cassandra

Glad to see a Kisian city—I had not thought it possible, but I let go a sigh of relief as Koi appeared through the trees. Koi, with its tall stone walls like a prison that once entered might never be escaped. Despite my determination, I had heard too many tales of the place not to hesitate, steadying myself upon the thick trunk of whatever these twisty old Kisian trees were called.

Leo had been some way behind, but as he drew level, he too stopped upon the hillside and stared down the thinning slope to where the city wall marked a stark border between civilisation and forest. The city had spilled beyond its walls to the south but not to the north, because that was like asking for Chiltaens to kill you in your sleep.

“It’s not as big as I expected,” Dom Villius said, surveying the city. Down the road, people came and went as though it were an ordinary day the same as any other.

“Not as big as you expected?” I said. “It’s huge.”

“The way my father talks of Koi, you would think its battlements touched the sky. The great impenetrable city of Koi, with its even more impenetrable castle. Any leader who could take it by force would be a hero.”

“I’m sure with enough expendable soldiers, anything can be done.”

He kept his gaze on the castle. Many crimson flags hung from its towers

making it look as though blood stained its stones. “The philosopher Anticine once tried to model how many soldiers it would take.”

“Oh yes? And how many?”

“Upwards of ten thousand would die before a man could stand uninvited in the throne room of Koi.”

“What’s the plan, pile the corpses outside the walls and climb over?”

Leo Villius shot me one of his disdainful looks. “If only it were that easy. His plan was quite complicated and near impossible to execute. Better to just send one man.” He bowed theatrically. “Amusing that my enemies, too, hired only one woman.”

“Don’t make it sound like we’re some holy couple, God boy,” I said and pointed down at the city. “I’m not here to help you with whatever your plans are; I have my own. Now I got us here without either of us dying, so —”

“It was close. The mushrooms were a mistake. And that lizard last night...” He made a face, but his eyes laughed. “You must be a very good whore, because you’re a terrible assassin and an even worse cook.”

My knife leapt to my hand, and his amusement fled as the blade pricked his neck. Leo Villius’s eyes widened, but his damnable pride kept him standing tall. “I never told you I was a whore. You’re doing that thing again where you know things you shouldn’t.”

He said nothing. Stood his ground, eyes barely blinking.

“Just remember, the moment you become more annoying than you are useful you will get to see how terrible an assassin I am.” I sheathed the blade. “Now let’s keep moving before the sight of this damn place makes me piss myself.”

“As you wish, Your Whoreness.” He had taken a few steps but turned to look back over his shoulder. “Or should it be Your Assassinness? Whoresassin!”

I growled and shoved him, and he laughed his way toward the road snaking its way from forest to city. It was empty but for us, while the southbound road was busy with carts and traders and travellers and even the brightly coloured cart of a Kisian priest.

“The road to the border ought to be busier,” Leo said as though in agreement, his serious streak reasserting itself at last. “Koi is one of our biggest trading posts.”



“The ambush of Dom Leo Villius might have left people disinclined to make the journey, don’t you think? How pleased they will be to find it was just a terrible mistake and you’re not dead after all. You can marry the princess, and everyone can live happily ever after.”

“This is Kisia we’re talking about.”

“Good point.”

Once he’d stopped complaining about his poor feet, he hadn’t been a terrible companion. He had even learnt to build a fire, taking perverse pleasure in the things common folk took for granted, even deigning to stain his holy hands with blood the last time I caught rabbits.

*She* would have laughed, not only because I had come to almost like the God’s child but because *She* had filled my dreams and been ever in my waking thoughts. The ache of decay ate at me day and night, and though my body was whole and well, I could not draw a full breath, nor walk or run as far or as fast, and sleep came only in wretched snatches. I had wanted to be free of *Her*, but free and whole, not free and chained to the fears and pains of a rotting corpse.

I tried for the thousandth time to take a full, deep, glorious breath, stretching my lungs to capacity, but as though a weight sat upon my chest, I could not.

It was getting worse.

We joined the road half a mile shy of the city gates, alone upon its northern arm except for a Chiltaen man with a pair of mules heading for the border. Leo nodded to him, but if he had expected some sign of acknowledgement, he was to be disappointed. The trader just looked us up and down from beneath the broad brim of his hat. We had seen no one since escaping the ambush, no town or village, not even a crazy hermit who lived in the woods. We had attempted to wash our clothes in one of the many streams, but there was only so much one could do with blood and mud and the sort of sweat that tends to pour out of one at the height of a sultry summer. We were filthy and we stank, and worst of all, Leo had grown a beard. At least, he liked to call it a beard and touched its wispy hairs often.

The trader grunted and went on his way.

“You don’t look much like a man of God,” I said. “Let alone the son of the hieromonk.”

“God cares not for one’s appearance.”

“Too bad he isn’t here then, he could vouch for your identity at the gates.”

“Don’t worry, they’ll let us in.”

Koi’s gatehouse stood over the road like a furious matron towering above a naughty child. Its boltholes glared down at us, and the imperial flag fluttered like the matron’s bloodstained apron. And between her legs the only way in or out.

Twelve guards stood on duty, half in the modest garb of city guards, the other half wearing the imperial colours. They were holding up all who sought entrance, demanding papers and rummaging through bags, in some cases even spilling the contents upon the sun-baked stones beneath the gatehouse’s angry gaze.

We carried nothing but my knives, a combined hunger loud enough to deafen, and a desperate need for a bath. No papers. No coins with which to bribe the guards. But still Leo strode toward the gate, so proud that despite his filth, more than one traveller stopped arguing with the guards to stare at him.

“Papers,” one of the city guards said, stepping in front of Leo and holding out his hand.

“I don’t have any,” Leo said in a voice too well educated to match his appearance. “I did, but they got lost when my carriage was attacked.”

The guard laughed, and one of his companions joined in. “Will you listen to that, boys,” he said. “The poor man’s lost his papers. In a carriage! Very fancy for the likes of you.” He glanced at me over Leo’s shoulder. “This your mother? She can ride my carriage any time.”

“No, this is my bodyguard,” Leo returned, unfailingly calm.

“Bodyguard?”

“Yes. My name is Dom Leo Villius, heir to His Holiness the hieromonk of Chiltae, blessed in the eyes of the One True God. Prince Tanaka attacked my carriage but failed to kill me, so I’m here to offer him the chance to finish the job.”

Shock sucked all sound from the day and every guard froze. None of them moved or spoke or even seemed to breathe until the whispers of the gathering crowd at last thawed their bones. An imperial guard stepped forward. “Prince Tanaka is dead,” he said, the words emotionless. “Executed. For killing you.”

A bolt of panic shot through me and I stepped back, a string of expletives only stalled by the touch of Leo's hand on my arm. "We are sorry to hear of his passing," he said, maintaining contact even as he made the sign of the One True God with his other hand. "I will convey my condolences to the imperial family."

"Leo," I whispered, turning in the hope only he would hear me. "This is a bad idea."

Ignoring me, he added, "If you could spare me an escort, it would be greatly appreciated."

The guard glanced around at our growing audience, all whispering and pointing, and gestured to one of his men. "Captain?"

"Take these two to the castle," the captain said, still eyeing the crowd. "Take four men and don't let them out of your sight. Check them for weapons first."

"But Captain, he can't be Dom Villius, His Majesty would not—"

"It is not your place to speculate on what His Majesty may or may not do, Kovako, it is your job to do what I tell you to do. I need them out of here before they make a scene. Let someone else clean up this mess, because we sure don't get paid enough to do it."

The guard bowed. "Yes, Captain."

I fought the urge to run as one of the guards took the two knives I handed over and checked me for more. I could not hear the call of the dead here, but I could hear the whispers of the living, could see the glances shared between guards and how close their hands stayed to their weapons. Koi's hackles were up like a frightened dog, and like a frightened dog, it was likely to bite.



The palanquin smelt of sweat and rice wine and stale incense, or in a word, it smelt like Kisia. On my first visit, I had lived at a whorehouse in Lin'ya, pouring tea badly and playing the flute even worse, but though the other girls had sniggered and thrown things at me and called me milk face, I had got my man and left them the gruesome gift of his corpse. The only smells that could have completed my memory were those of tea and semen, neither

of which I was keen to add.

Leo had screwed up his nose at the stink, but he now lay at ease upon the bank of cushions, stretching his legs to take up as much space as possible. I ignored his plea for attention.

“This is much better than walking,” he said when I didn’t bite. “I could get used to this.”

“Don’t you already get carried around everywhere?”

“Carried where? I don’t go to the market or to parties or brothels or even to the tourneys on the Ribbon.”

My thoughts had been racing ahead to the castle and what we might find there, but that got my attention. “I’ve seen you all over the city. Crowds come and cluster a dozen deep to get your blessing.”

He paused, snapping his jaw shut on what he had been about to say. “Yes, of course. But walking out to attend my people in the name of God is not what I meant.”

We maintained silence the rest of the way, my thoughts once more running ahead. She was here, connecting me to Jonus’s decaying body, to the itchy feeling of slipping skin, to the smell of rot and to the cold. It had seeped into my very bones, not even the noontime sun able to warm me. I needed the Witchdoctor. I needed Jonus’s head.

The usual city noises washed around us as we were carried through Koi, but below the current of chatter, of shouting hawkers, braying animals, and squealing children, ran an undertow of tension. Of trouble.

*Prince Tanaka is dead.*

The palanquin did not halt until we reached the castle gates, shut fast and looming. Only by peering through a crack in the curtains could I get a good look at them and the many guards on duty—many more than ought to be required to guard a closed gate in peace time.

Each man carried wariness and spoke in a low voice, eyeing our palanquin and the city as though expecting both to erupt at any moment.

“This is not a happy city,” I said in a low tone, breaking the silence. “And it’s seeping from the castle.”

“Yes, Emperor Kin executed his son. There’s more, but it’s tangled and strange and I can’t make sense of—”

“You’re doing that thing again.” I glared at the God’s child in his silk-spun shadow. “And you call me a freak.”

He wasn't listening, rather had his ears pricked to sounds beyond the palanquin's old curtains.

"Leo? Don't ignore me, I—"

A guard pulled the curtain aside and scowled in at us, his forehead beaded with sweat. "You've checked them?"

"Yes, Commander. The woman had two knives on her. He had nothing."

Two, I sneered inwardly, though I knew She wouldn't hear me. *They're so used to sandals in Kisia they never check boots.*

The commander swept his glare back over us and then grunted, letting the curtain fall. "Secure the curtains in case they are spies, then open the gates."

"Yes, Commander."

The all-too-many imperial guards shuffled around beyond the curtains, tugging on the material and stretching it onto hooks. As the fabric pulled taut, our comfortable, if stinky, conveyance became a prison owning not even the smallest hole. A heavy tread walked a lap, checking it over while I sat, as taut as the walls of our cell, trying to slow my rapid breathing.

"Good. Open the gates!"

"Open the gates!" Many voices carried the order up and over the wall until the mechanism inside the gatehouse began to click and creak, opening its maw.

Leo's hand touched my arm and I jolted back. "Cassandra?" he said as I retreated to a corner. "Are you all right?"

The last time I'd been closed in so small a space had been inside an old merchant's wardrobe, hiding amongst the musty coats while his wife searched the room. Almost I had leapt out and killed her too, just so I didn't have to stay trapped in the airless wooden box, but She had talked me down, had calmed me as only She could.

"Cassandra?"

We were moving again, leaving behind the city's noise for the castle's grim silence.

"Are you—?"

"I'm fine."

I closed my eyes and tried to focus upon our movements. I might not be able to see, but I could feel each turn, could feel the palanquin pitch up and down, and knew arches and gatehouses by their passing darkness. Voices

and footsteps filtered through the silk too, rising in volume only to ebb as we left guard posts behind.

I had not the skill to piece it all together into a coherent mental map, but the constant change in sound and light and direction proved Koi's impenetrability had nothing to do with the thickness of its walls and everything to do with the maze of its outer defences.

"Are all visitors carried through like this?" I said as the palanquin eventually levelled out in full sunlight. In our wake, a gate creaked closed.

"All foreigners are, yes. Father thinks it's just for show now since maps of its layout were bought from impecunious guards a long time ago. Knowing the castle's design hasn't brought anyone closer to storming it."

The creaking ended in a bang and we slowed, our carriers sucking heavy breaths. Then the palanquin hit the ground with a bump.

"Let them out."

The first curtain unhooked with a snap, and the guard had barely moved before I tumbled onto his feet. He shouted, but I just curled up on the warm stones, gasping breaths as though the world had grown thin of air.

"Get up."

Movement fluttered above, and I opened my eyes to see Leo gripping the man's wrist. "Leave her," he said. "She needs a moment to recover. There is no need to bestow cruelty in the name of speed."

Even though Kisians cared nothing for our God, the guard stepped back rather than strike one who claimed to be Dom Villius. I ought to have thanked Leo for intervening, but it had been weak and foolish to need his help at all. I pulled myself up, head spinning.

And from inside the castle, She called from her prison of dying flesh.

We had stopped in a broad courtyard. Arches appeared to lead to further courtyards and walled gardens, but the imposing enormity of Koi Castle overshadowed it all. It stood before us like a perched beast, its strong stone foundations and grand soaring roofs curving like wings about to take flight. And everywhere hung the blood-coloured banners of the imperial family. Blood stained the courtyard too, real blood, though half a dozen maids knelt scrubbing it from the stones. The dead watched. Upwards of two-dozen spikes decorated the courtyard, each owning an upside-down head shrivelling in the heat. One of the serving girls knelt beneath the closest, scrubbing away the congealed juices of a man's brain.

Leo's face paled to a ghostly hue. "Who are these men?"

"Traitors," one of the Kisians said, but the word owned no anger, only bitterness. He kept his eyes averted, preferring to stare straight ahead at the opening castle doors. "Come. Her Majesty wants to see you."

"Her Majesty? Emperor Kin is not unwell, I hope."

The man shot a glance at Leo only to turn away, seeming to find his pale-eyed stare as disconcerting as I did. "Come, she is already waiting. News travels fast upon foul winds."

Silence greeted us inside the castle, the echo of our steps the only sound in the dark hall. It would have been dark at the best of times with such thick beams and sturdy walls, but every bolthole and window had been draped in black. There were no Ts'ai banners here and none of the watercolours and screens and beauty the Kisians prided themselves on, just a dark hall made all the darker by grief.

The guards strode quickly, but Leo refused to be hurried and walked at a pace befitting his station. He had not cared for such things out in the wilderness, but bit by bit, civilisation seemed to be reinflating his self-importance.

Another dark room followed the first. Crimson-clad guards lined its walls, and a single man with the fussy look of a scribe stood before the throne room doors.

"Is this the... the...?" The little man looked at us before his gaze snapped back to our guards. "They cannot see Her Majesty dressed like that."

"Our orders were to bring them straight here, Chancellor."

"At least have them wash their faces. They are covered in dirt and the gods themselves only know what else. And those boots." The man shuddered and signalled to a servant hovering in the darkness. "Quick, man, bring cloths and warm water. And sandals."

"I'll keep my boots," I said, but the man did not deign to look at me, let alone respond. He flustered about Leo, wringing his hands and muttering to himself until the servant returned. Leo bore it with perfect calm. Make him sleep on the ground and eat wild animals and he fell to pieces, but give him mad men fussing about shoes and a castle so tense it could have loosed an arrow and he was right at home.

The servant placed wooden sandals on the floor in front of me. "I said,

I'll keep my boots."

Leo slid his sweaty, blistered feet into the pair of wooden sandals and wiggled his toes. No one seemed to care whether I did the same or not, so I didn't. A warm washcloth was thrust into my hand, and though I stood my ground on my boots, I did wash my face and hands and felt all the better for doing so.

Once satisfied, the flustered man pushed open the doors, ushering us into the room where the first Otako Emperor had been crowned hundreds of years before, where Kisia had been born, a room famed for its blood-coloured windows and its enormous lacquered throne. Yet like the rest of the castle, it spilled no light upon our feet. The stained-glass windows were shrouded in black, leaving the space a patchwork of shadows and darkness. More guards lined the walls, still like statues, and at the end of the room, raised upon a dais, a small figure sat in a carved throne more black than crimson.

No sound accompanied our entrance but that of our steps and the thud of my heart. Empress Hana Ts'ai, the last living child of Emperor Lan Otako, watched us, shrouded in black, her silk mourning robes flowing from throne to floor like a midnight stream.

The head guard stopped and knelt at a carved stone in the centre of the floor, and pressing his head to the ground, he waited.

"Rise."

Despite her grieving aspect, Empress Hana's rich voice carried to the far corners of the room with ease.

"Your Majesty," the man said and turned to indicate us. "These are the two who claim to be—"

"Yes. Step forward."

Leo moved first, stepping up to the stone and bowing as the guard had, the foreign protocol as natural to him as breathing. Eyes weighed heavily upon me and I did the same, setting my forehead to the floor exactly as the girls in Lin'ya had done before every guest who came through the doors.

"Rise."

Hearing Leo move, I followed. *She* might not be in my head any longer, but I was screaming enough in there for the both of us. This had been a very bad idea. The look upon Empress Hana's face promised suffering.

"You claim to be Dom Leo Villius of Chiltae," she said before Leo could



speak. “But Dom Leo Villius of Chiltæ is dead. I have seen his body.”

“With the greatest respect, Your Majesty, you have seen the body of my servant and bodyguard. Such a ruse is possible when no one knows your face, and necessary, as events have proven.”

The empress stared at Leo. “This woman is not then your bodyguard as you claimed?”

“No. She is my assassin.”

I tensed, hands reaching toward knives that were no longer present as every guard stepped between us and their empress, drawing steel.

“You are here to kill me then, Dom Leo Villius of Chiltæ?” she said over their heads.

“You misunderstand, Your Majesty. She is not here to kill you, she was hired to kill me.”

“Hired to kill you,” Empress Hana said slowly. “Is this crime to be lain at Kisia’s feet?”

“No, Your Majesty. She was hired by my own countrymen, by people who did not wish for my marriage to Her Imperial Highness to go ahead. These are not my—”

Hurrying footsteps approached and Leo turned. A man in a loose Chiltæen mantle slowed as he entered the room. “My deepest apologies, Your Majesty, but I heard... I could not but come and see...” He trailed off, staring at Leo.

“Ambassador Reedus,” Leo said. “It is good to see you.”

“You recognise this man, Ambassador?” the empress asked, ice in her tone. “Did you not also identify the other body as Dom Leo Villius?”

“No! I mean yes, Your Majesty, I accepted his identity because I have never seen his face, but this man... I know him by his voice. He truly is Dom Leo Villius, praise to the One True God for preserving you.” He bowed to the empress. “Your Majesty, there is still time to sue for peace. Marriage to Her Highness—”

Empress Hana stood suddenly, seeming to tower over the room. “Princess Miko has abandoned her duty and made herself a traitor to the empire.” Hurt and fury throbbed in her voice and her hands clenched. “You have come to a broken house, Dom Leo Villius of Chiltæ. What you once expected to find is no longer here. And as your countrymen are already marching on our borders, you are worth as little to me as you were to those

who wished you dead. Your only value now lies in being bargained to your father when he marches his army this way.”

She sat back down. “Take him away, ambassador. Make sure he’s comfortable; it could be a long wait.”

A heavy hand landed on my shoulder, insisting I bow, but as I did so, Empress Hana spoke again, stealing the budding hope that I might yet escape this hell. “The assassin stays. I am not yet done with her.”

Leo bowed, and the ambassador led him away amid a knot of crimson-clad guards. When the doors closed behind them, I stood alone before the Empress of Kisia. For a long time, her bright eyes cut into me, seeming as Leo’s did to see through my flesh and into my thoughts. But unlike Leo, she appeared unable to read what resided within and eventually resorted to words.

“My son tried to kill him,” she said, resting her hands upon the arms of the throne. “You were hired to kill him. How is it that Dom Villius has yet evaded death?”

Fear would have kept me staring at the floor, but if I was going to die, then I would look death in the eye. “He is not dead because your son killed the wrong man,” I said, returning her unblinking stare with one of my own. “And because I needed him alive.”

I uttered no obsequious *Your Majesty*, but though the guards scowled, Empress Hana merely leant forward. “You needed him alive? Explain yourself, assassin.”

“Alive, he could get me inside this castle.”

The guards who stood between us had not sheathed their weapons nor let down their guard, but they shifted their feet as though to remind me of their presence.

“And why was it so imperative that you get inside my castle?”

Honesty had worked so far, but there were some things I could not say, some truths that would never be believed. “I was hired not only to kill Dom Villius, but also his servant, Jonus, the corpse Prince Tanaka brought here dead. To complete that contract, I need the man’s head.”

“You take quite a risk for the head of a servant.”

“I do what I am told.”

She smiled, lips tight and full of suspicion. “Then Dom Villius should be dead.”

“Some contracts are more important than others, Your Majesty,” I said. “And it hardly seems to matter now whether he lives or dies. I believe I was hired to kill him so you could be blamed for his death, but Prince Tanaka fulfilled my contract for me. You could shout from every rooftop that Dom Villius is alive, that Prince Tanaka killed the wrong man, but that wouldn’t change anything, would it? Although your enemies might enjoy knowing you executed your son for nothing.”

Her smile died in a snarl. “Enough. I know my crimes. I pray you suffer the same fate before you die. Until then you, too, are my guest.” Empress Hana nodded to the guards. “Take her away. She is not to see Dom Villius and neither may leave the castle.”

They all bowed. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

Too much honesty, it seemed, had not been wise.



My narrow window looked out over the courtyard of dead traitors. It might have been a coincidence, but Empress Hana didn’t seem the sort of woman who left such things to chance.

Beyond the maze of castle walls, the city of Koi stretched away. Out there, afternoon sank into evening, and through the lengthening shadows, people scurried under a cloud of fear. The Chiltaens were already marching. They were coming. And if I did not escape soon, I would get stuck in a city besieged by my own people.

A silent maid brought food and tea and clean clothes and water, coming and going with a nod to the guard outside my door. I ate. I sipped at the foul tea. I washed and changed and lay down on the sleeping mat. It was better than a prison cell, but comfortable or not, I had not come to stay.

Night smothered the castle, and in darkness, I lay listening to the noises outside my window—the whinny of horses, the footsteps and shouts of busy soldiers, and the roar of the wind bringing relief to a sultry summer night. Inside, the castle was quiet. Footsteps passed occasionally, some the soft treads of servants, others the harsh clack of wooden sandals accompanied by whispers. Some slowed as they passed my door, needing my guard’s grumble to set them moving again.

And over it all rang Her unceasing cries.

I rose from my mat. Dull light filtered in through the screen door the Kisians liked so much, throwing my guard's silhouette onto its panes. Not the malformed shape of someone standing at a distance, but the precise outline of someone just beyond the paper.

The shadow shifted its weight from one leg to the other as I approached with slow steps, planting each foot with care lest my boots crackle the reeds. He shifted his weight again and adjusted the hang of his sword. Then he scratched.

I stopped with my nose a few inches from the taut paper. No footsteps. No voices. No sound but that of his fingernails upon the rough fabric of his breeches.

I cleared my throat. His silhouette spun and the taut paper snapped as I thrust my fist into his gut. The guard drew his dagger even as he gasped for breath, and he would have jabbed it into me had I not kicked his leg hard, sending him staggering onto hands and knees. His head reared up and I gripped it and twisted, the snap of his neck as viscerally pleasing as the snap of the paper pane.

Having dragged him into the room, I closed the door and strode out into the castle's dark passages. They were all narrow, their thick beams blackened with smoke, but through what ought to have been a maze, Her call drew me on. I followed her cry from the wooden upper levels down into the stone foundations where light did not stray, her anguish growing louder and more desperate as I neared.

I found her in a long, low chamber lit by hanging lanterns. Jonus's body lay upon a stone slab, beside other slabs owning other bodies, each with a wooden pail between their feet. A workbench sat against the wall, and though it held the usual items one might need when dealing with the dead, it also carried a pile of notes in Kisian script and what appeared to be the entire spilled contents of a physician's bag.

I edged in, disliking the cold silence of the place. A shadow shifted. A step scuffed. Then the wooden door slammed into its stone frame, and from the shadows stepped Empress Hana, flanked by daggers. They had men attached, but that hardly seemed important.

"You have escaped your guard, avoided capture, and somehow managed to extract information about the whereabouts of your servant from my

people,” she said. “And all without raising the alarm. You are good.”

I could have set her straight on a few points but chose not to. And when I didn’t speak, the empress, still dressed in her river of black silk, said, “How many of my men did you kill?”

“One,” I said. “I didn’t like his humming.”

“You had a concealed blade my men did not find?”

I licked my lips, eyes on her guards. “No,” I said, though the weight of my dagger remained in my boot. “I snapped his neck.”

“Ah,” she said. “A skill I was never taught.”

“Desperation is a good teacher.” So had been Ithcus and Allovian. The blessed guards at the hospice hadn’t been allowed to protect me from the other children or the clerics, so they had taught me to protect myself instead.

The empress nodded to her guards. “You may lower your weapons. Locked in here, there is little purpose to Miss Marius killing me.”

The imperial guards obeyed, but neither looked pleased to be shut in a cold, dim room with the dead for company.

“You know my name,” I said.

“I know lots of things.” She started toward the slab on which Jonus lay. “There is one thing I do not know, however, and that is why this body is dead and yet fights to stay in this world.”

I followed, edging closer to the body as Her call rose to a desperate scream. Jonus had been stripped to the waist, and though many days had passed, he looked better than I had expected. His skin was grey and his body had sagged and slumped, but it was not yet oozing. And his eyes were open, staring unblinking at the stone ceiling above.

“The finest minds in Koi have examined it,” the empress said. “They tell me he is dead. The number of arrow wounds”—she indicated one that had gone deep into his cheek—“tell me he is dead. He does not breathe. His heart does not beat. He ought to be rotten. But one only has to close his eyes for them to open again. Alert.”

I had seen many bodies, had killed many men, yet never had I seen anything as terrible as this body caught between life and death. I touched its cold flesh, and with the fury of a striking snake, heat coiled up my arm to bury deep in my temple. Jonus’s body sagged. And inside my head, She wailed. Memories flashed. The pain of the tightening, dying body, of the

arrow holes and the cuts the physicians had made trying to let out the bad spirits. Darkness. Fear. They had carried Her dangling upon a scaffold, had displayed Her as a trophy, and She had been trapped inside with no way out.

I staggered back, turning in time to vomit onto the floor rather than the empress's feet.

"What did you do?" she said. "Its eyes have closed."

Empress Hana stood before me, but my vision blurred and I retched again, spraying the last of my dinner across the stones.

"I don't know," I managed, wiping my mouth on my sleeve. "I just touched it. I don't know."

*Get me out of here.*

It started as a plea, small and pitiful, but while Empress Hana examined the body, it rose to a scream. *Get me out of here! I want out of this castle, out of this body, away from you and them and everything. Now!*

Her screams deafened my thoughts. "You are more than you appear, Miss Marius," Empress Hana said, standing once more before me. "Hold out your left hand."

I did so dumbly, not even thinking to disobey. The Empress of Kisia gripped my hand and turned it over, palm up, only to scowl and let the hand fall.

"You have no birthmarks?"

"No."

"Nowhere? No strange markings?"

"No."

She shook her head. "That cannot be right. I must be missing something."

*Take his head.*

"What?" I said aloud.

*Take his damn head and have the Witchdoctor cut me out of you, because in God's name, I will not stay here anymore.*

Empress Hana shook her head. "Your touch. You did something. Is that why you want the head?"

*Just take it!*

"I... no, no I need the head because those were the terms of my contract. Proof the man was dead. That is all I know. Please let me take it. Please let

me go. You have Leo now, what further value can I be?”

“A good assassin has infinite value.”

“Not trapped inside a besieged city they don’t.”

“No, but you can ensure that fate does not befall either of us.”

The room kept spinning and She screamed curses, blotting my thoughts. “What?”

“I did not wait for you so we could have a lovely chat,” Empress Hana said. “I wanted to see how good you were. You passed the test. Now I have another job for you, and when you complete it, you may come back for the head.”

*Just do it so we can get the head and leave.*

“Yes, yes, whatever you wish.”

“I want you to kill the hieromonk of Chiltae.”

I looked from the empress to her guards, both impassive statues. “The hieromonk?”

“That is what I said. He is marching here at the head of an army. They will be at our gates within days. Let his army see him struck down as though having earned the ire of his god, and we may yet turn back the tide of this war.”

“You ask this of a Chiltaen?”

“I ask it of an assassin desperate enough for this man’s head that she risks entering this castle. Do you accept my bargain?”

I stared at her, my thoughts spinning fast. It was madness to think I could get close to the hieromonk without time and information and weeks of careful planning, but the look on the empress’s face promised suffering if I refused.

“I accept,” I said, any lie worth telling if it would get me out of the castle alive. “Give me the head and the hieromonk will die.”

“The hieromonk dies, and then you may have the head.”

Neither of us moved or spoke for what felt like an age, nothing but the occasional *tink* of hot glass from the work lanterns breaking the silence of our stone tomb. She would not bend, I knew she would not, and yet to leave the castle without the head would be to wait longer for the Witchdoctor, to risk never meeting him at all. There were only two guards. I could kill them. I could kill her. I could take the head. That would all be easy enough, but getting out of the castle—out of the city—would be next to impossible

after it was done.

“All right,” I said. “We’ll do it your way.”

“Wise choice. Don’t worry, I always uphold my end of the bargain. The head will be kept ready for your triumphant return.”

It seemed like a good time to bow and I did so, murmuring thanks and assurances in a single fevered outpouring like a drunk man slopping words all over the first lady he saw. When I lifted my head, it was in time to see one of the empress’s guards bring his sword down upon Jonus’s neck, not once but three times, hacking skin and flesh and sending foul fluid pouring onto the slab.

Empress Hana picked up the head by its hair and looked into Jonus’s dead eyes. “My guards will see you out now. Safe travels, Miss Marius.”



## Chapter 14

### Rah

We rode behind our herd master, our combined herd a cavalcade of thunder that rolled across a strange land beneath a strange sky. As Gideon had promised, Juta rode with us, his long hair whipping out in the wind as he sat astride a well-sized bay mare.

Without Eska or Kishava or Orun to ride at my side, it was Yitti who joined me, nudging his horse up beside Jinso. At first the wind stole all words from our lips, leaving so many things unsaid. About Gideon, about Kishava, about Juta and the herd masters back home and the Chiltaens who urged us on toward war. But once we slowed our pace and conversation was possible, every thought clogged my throat and left me mute.

I knew nothing of how the Chiltaens rode to war, but they seemed to have split their army upon leaving camp, with the bulk of their foot soldiers marching off along the road in company with carts carrying barrels and logs and rope and wheels with spokes sticking out. Teams of oxen hauled boulders too, and contraptions I could put no name to even had I tried. The rest of us—the Levanti and the mounted Chiltaens—left the road behind and cut across wide fields, sending sheep and cattle running at the sound of our approach.

“It looks a little like the southern plains just here,” I said to Yitti when all other more important words failed to reach my tongue.

The healer looked around as though seeing our surroundings for the first

time, his brow crinkling. “A bit. Not enough flies. Or mangrove swamps.”

“Not that far south, just that bit around the old Tannis groves and—” I broke off, recalling I’d only visited the area in the company of Whisperer Jinnit. The Torin rarely ventured so far south.

Yitti nodded, understanding. “Nope, never been. I just hear there are lots of swamps and flies down that way. So the Bedjuti have been saying. And the Namalaka. Good people, the Namalaka.”

Some of them had chosen to stay behind, refusing to fight this war that was not their own. Would Kishava still be alive if I had made that choice? We did not fight the wars of others and yet here we were, riding to a battle we didn’t even understand.

“Their healer promised to take good care of Amun,” Yitti went on, focusing ahead though little effort was needed to keep his horse following the one in front. Jinso would keep in line even if I dozed off.

The road and the rest of the army were long gone from sight, nothing to see now but the prettiness of a summer day made hazy with kicked-up dust. The Chiltaens riding front and back carried no flags or supplies and barely outnumbered us, yet Gideon led us on without a hint of our destination or purpose.

“Where do you think we’re going?”

Yitti stared at the sky as though the clouds held an answer. “South. To kill Kisians.”

“You don’t think...?” I left the question hanging, but Yitti made no effort to pick up the thread. “You don’t think Gideon might give the order to kill these Chiltaens and escape?”

“He’d have done that already and turned back to raid the carts they were packing at the camp.”

“You’ve thought it through.”

He didn’t answer, but I could not keep quiet with so many thoughts and questions filling my head. “What do you think he’s planning?” I said after a few minutes of trying. “He says there’s no future for us back home, so maybe he’s going to try to bargain this war into some land for us and our herds. But could we really bring them here? The Chiltaens would never let us.”

“You said you trusted Gideon.”

I met Yitti’s silent stare for as long as I could before shame ran hot

through my body. Trust of Gideon was the entire reason we were riding to a foreign war, and in that moment, I wondered if Yitti could see it for the lie it was. It ought to have been true, but the fact that he could not trust me with his plans had made me fear them.

After enough ground had passed beneath us to allow me to change the subject, I said, “Would you live here? Do you think we could keep being... Levanti here? Could we roam? Can the gods still see us?”

Yitti screwed up his nose, his weather-worn features always expressive. “Is that what it means to be Levanti?”

“I don’t know. But this doesn’t look like home.”

“Except for that southern bit near the old Tannis groves.”

I had to laugh. “Yes, except for that bit.”

We sped back to a canter soon after, and I was both sorry and not to leave the conversation behind. As the morning progressed, we left the fields for sparsely wooded hills and valleys, and our first stop of the afternoon was atop a ridge that overlooked a thick forest. It stretched far into the summer haze, its canopy alive with birdsong. Our horses drank at a stream that trickled down some rocks and into the forest below, snaking beneath a stone bridge and off into the distance.

“A fine place for an ambush, don’t you think?” Gideon stepped up beside me, his hands on his hips as he surveyed the forest down the other side of the ridge.

“I thought we were attacking a city.”

“We will, but I got word that a Kisian battalion travelling to Tian will be coming this way. Not their safest route, but their fastest.”

“*You* got word?”

Gideon smiled. “Do you think they would do more than put up with me if I had nothing to offer? No sources of information?” He put his hand on my shoulder. “I told you we could do this and I meant it. We will make this place ours.”

He patted my shoulder a few times then turned to address the Swords around us. “We will be mounting an ambush from a spot a bit farther along the ridge where the slope is not so steep. Half of us—the Jaroven, the Occha, and the Oht will stay atop the ridge on horseback, under the command of Captain Yiss en’Oht and Commander Brutus. The rest of us will be leaving our horses at a safe distance and taking to the trees and

bushes along a stretch of the road down there with all the bows and javelins we have. A Kisian battalion is just shy of a thousand soldiers, and if we're lucky, we may even get four of them."

The terrain was nothing like we were used to, but Levanti were good at ambushes—at any form of fighting that meant losing as few people as possible. The city states fielded armies like they had an endless supply of people, and maybe they did inside those walls, but we did not. The abundance of our groves and our cattle dictated our birth rate, not how many warriors we needed.

My Second Swords were given an early section of the road, Gideon trusting in our ability to wait patiently for his signal while hundreds of Kisian soldiers marched past. By stretching ourselves out, we could catch as many as possible by surprise, and if all went well and we stayed unseen, Gideon could even let their leaders go by before giving the signal to attack the middle, thereby cutting the army in half. And when chaos had taken hold, the rest of the Levanti and all the Chiltaens could swarm down the slope on their horses and finish them off.

I ordered all my Swords who owned bows and javelins to climb into the trees. They were used to climbing groves to harvest fruits and nuts, but none of them looked convinced this was a wise idea. "If you can loose an arrow into a man's throat from a moving horse, then you can do it from the top of a tree," I said, pushing Himi and Istet toward the nearest trunk. "Just make sure you're out of sight and don't move and don't talk."

"We know how an ambush works, Captain," Istet snapped. "It's just unnatural hanging about in the leaves."

They shimmied up the trunk, however, and were soon gone. All around me, Swords were finding places to lie low in the undergrowth. "I can see your foot, Dhamara. And your arm, Ubaid. Maat, watch that—yes, that's better."

"Good work, Rah," Gideon said, striding past. "Let's show them all how a proper ambush is done."

Once all my Swords were well hidden, I lay down beneath a thick wad of ferns beside Yitti and let go a deep breath. My heart was still beating fast from the exertion of preparation and I knew I was breathing too loud, but my healer made no complaint. He lay with his arms folded before him, his hunting knife loose in one hand.

Gradually, all sound ebbed away until there was nothing but a gentle rustling of wind in the trees and the chirping of the birds. Gideon had said we were no more than an hour or two southeast of Tian, in Kisian territory, and ought to expect the soldiers well before nightfall, yet rather than tense up in anticipation of the coming fight, I found my eyelids drooping. I had gone so long without a good sleep I could hardly recall what it felt like to be well-rested.

“Captain,” Yitti whispered, knocking my elbow with his. “Bushes don’t snore.”

I rubbed drool from my lip. “I wasn’t, was I?”

“It wasn’t the bush.”

Shifting into a slightly more upright position helped though put more pressure on my bladder and made me wish I’d had less to drink at the stream. It helped keep me awake at least, and I watched the small section of the road I could see through the fern fronds. Across the other side, I thought I could just make out the ends of Juta’s dark hair curled up beside a tree trunk.

The birds quietened. I tensed, listening through the unrelenting symphony of insects filling the humid afternoon. No footsteps. No hoofbeats. Nothing but the sound of Yitti’s even breaths.

I wiped my sweaty brow upon my arm and adjusted an aching leg.

“Shh,” Yitti hissed.

He had tilted his head toward the road. Insects. The rustle of leaves. A footstep. It was many seconds before another and another, but I felt them through the ground as surely as I heard them.

Shoulder to shoulder, Yitti and I tensed. More footsteps sounded. Then the gentle murmur of conversation, the clop of hooves, and the rumble of a cart’s wheels. I saw the horse first, its tan legs walking into view and out again in the space of a breath. Another followed, wearing an ornate saddlecloth, then booted feet and the butts of spears. They marched past, each the same as the last, on and on until a cart broke the monotony. More legs followed, enlivened only by the occasional swish of a crimson coat or sash, or a group holding bows instead of spears. I could only guess how long it would take four thousand men to walk past—too long. I was getting twitchy and wanted Gideon to give the signal just so I could move.

As another cart trundled past, it came—a high-pitched wolf howl soon

swallowed as hundreds of Levanti leapt screaming into the fray. Yitti launched from the bushes, sticking his knife into a soldier's leg before I was even up, but as he wove away from a retaliatory strike, I slashed the man's throat. The horses hitched to the cart backed and snorted as I pierced the side of another soldier, a moment before the driver toppled off his perch, a javelin through his neck. With panicked squeals, the horses bolted, trampling a path through the Kisians trapped in the centre of the road.

Arrows rained down upon their column while we hacked from the sides and bodies fell thick. Most of the Kisians had no space to fight in and just died where they stood, crushed against their comrades and still clutching the spear or bow or sword they had been unable to swing.

Thunder rolled in on hundreds of hooves, and when the Kisians tried to run from the charging horses, they ran into us and died upon our blades. Bodies piled up beneath my feet, slick with blood, barely a Levanti amongst them.

In the haze of battle, it was soon over, barring a last chase after the runaways. A job for those on horseback. I was covered in so much blood that I felt heavy, and I doubted my legs had enough strength left in them to run.

I knelt as the last of the battle sounds faded away, my knees landing on a half-severed arm. There wasn't enough space to line up the dead in neat rows, but I hauled a body off the pile and tried not to look at the man's face, tried not to imagine his life. The sick, gut-churning feeling that always came on after a battle settled in my stomach as I made my first incision in the back of the soldier's neck. Nearby, Juta was doing the same, while Himi and Istet and Ubaid were separating corpses near a broken wagon farther along the road.

Yitti and a handful of helpers were gathering wounded Swords and had already set up a spot where the injured could be brought, he and Memat digging through their bags for supplies while others ran in search of wood for a cauterising fire.

"Stop!" Gideon strode along the edge of the road, both arms lifted to gain everyone's attention. "Stop what you are doing! Take only the heads of our own people. Leave the Kisian soldiers untouched." He kept walking, repeating the words. "Take only the heads of Levanti warriors. Do not touch the Kisians."

Juta met my gaze across the width of the dead-strewn road, a question in the lift of his brows. “Wait there,” I said, and slipping my knees out from beneath the dead Kisian whose head I had already half taken, I hurried after Gideon.

“Gideon.” I skidded in front of him forcing him to stop. “What do you mean we’re not taking their heads?”

A scowl flickered. “There isn’t time, Rah. We have to keep moving.”

“Isn’t time? Then we make time. We don’t leave souls trapped if we can free them.”

“We take the Levanti, but—”

“But all souls are the same to the gods, all souls are important. Just think of the harm it would do to leave so many left trapped here, and how much weight each of us will have added to our scales for letting it happen.”

Others were listening. Yitti and Juta and the rest of my Swords, even Captain Atum e’Jaroven. Most of the other captains were farther up the road and had probably already asked these questions, which explained the flicker of annoyance that crossed Gideon’s face but not the firm shake of his head. “No. Only Levanti.”

“But—”

“We don’t have time.”

I gestured at the Chiltaens gathered around, checking their wounds and their horses and going through the contents of the Kisian wagons, clearly in no hurry. “Time enough for at least some of them while our... *friends* take their rest.”

“Rah, as your First Sword and your herd master, I order you to leave the bodies alone.”

He tried to move past me, but I stepped in his way. “And I want to know why.”

Gideon licked his lips and, taking hold of my arm, forced me to walk with him, away from the others. “You need to stop this,” he said when we were far enough away to be alone. “You need to let it drop and you need to do as I ask without questioning me.”

“That is not the way of a herd master.”

“It is here. This is not home yet, Rah, and it will never be home if you don’t *listen* to me. No Kisian heads.” He made to walk back toward the great swathes of the dead.

“But why?”

With a hiss he spun back. “Because if we chop all their heads off, they will think us barbarians. They will think us monsters. They will want to be rid of us for the dishonour of their warriors.”

“The Kisians? What does it matter what our enemies think of us?”

Gideon held up his hands. “Just stop. No more questions, Rah, we’re done here. Do as I command, or I will give the captaincy of the Second Swords to someone who will.”

He walked away without looking back.



We left the Kisian souls trapped and their bodies lying in the road. It was against every one of our tenets, but they had been Gideon’s orders and no one dared disobey. Disobedience had gotten us all exiled in the first place, and what was an exiled exile?

The choice gnawed at me as we rode through the evening toward Tian, our pace slow so the few litters of wounded would not be left behind. It had been a successful ambush and the Chiltaens were triumphant. Many Levanti were too, enjoying their ride through the sunset as though returning to their herd after a good hunt. I could enjoy neither the ride nor the view, not even the company, though Dishiva rode alongside. All I could think of was the thousands of dead with their souls trapped. I tried to tell myself they were our enemies, but they weren’t. I tried to tell myself their souls had no value, but they did. I tried to tell myself they were different, but they weren’t.

“Let it go, Rah,” Dishiva said. “Let it go. We aren’t at home anymore.”

“But we’re still Levanti.”

“Whatever that means here. Look, they’ve set up a camp.”

I had never thought to be glad to see a Chiltaen camp, but I was tired and hungry and Jinso needed rest, making the sight of one taking shape feel almost like coming home.

A smudge of smoke rose ahead. Something was on fire and soldiers were massed on the hillside. “Is that the city we were meant to be attacking?” I said as our procession slowed.

Dishiva stretched her neck. “Looks like they got started without us.



Good for them. Good for us too, as there will be less to do in the morning.”

Up front, Gideon was pointing to the city and gesturing back to us, and the nothing in my hollow gut achieved a sinking sensation. “Not so good for us, I think. Here he comes.”

Gideon had turned to ride back down the line. “The gates of Tian are about to fall,” he called to the last of the evening light, hundreds of Levanti halting tired horses to hear him. “This battle can be over tonight. The city taken. One last fight I ask of you all before you rest.”

“Why the hurry?” Dishiva asked. “It’s not like reinforcements are coming.”

Some laughter at the dead men lying in the road, trapped in their old skins.

Gideon stopped his progress and gave her a severe look. “You don’t sleep in the middle of a hunt and let the prey escape, do you, Captain Dishiva?”

“No, but—”

Deigning no further answer, he urged his horse on along the road, repeating the shout as he went. “Well shit,” Dishiva said with a sigh and checked her weapons. “Just what I wanted after a whole day riding and fighting: more riding and fighting.”

“Are you ready?” Gideon shouted a few minutes later as he returned up the line. “Leave no one standing. Those are your orders. No one at all.”

“No one?” I said, but he did not stop and answer, just continued on to rein in beside Commander Brutus. The man who had, with a sneer and a laugh, ordered Orun’s head chopped off. He said something and Gideon laughed. And I tightened my grip on Jinso’s reins.

“Are we riding down there now, Captain?” Juta asked, edging his new horse alongside.

“So it seems.” The boy had loosed his hair for the ride but began to tie it up again, tired hands shaking.

“Here.” I held out my hand as he almost dropped the leather tie, the effort of holding his arms up for so long more than they could handle.

Juta gave me the tie with a salute and, drawing his horse as close as he could, turned his head and leant back. A ponytail was soon achieved, and as I patted him on the shoulder to show I was done, I whispered, “Hang back. Let others who have had longer to recover from their march take the lead.

There is no point in pushing yourself when you're this tired."

"And you, Captain?"

"It's different when you're a captain. You have to ride in front."

"Then I will ride with you."

I wanted to point out how foolish such stubbornness was, but a bellow cut across my words, and all around us, Levanti surged.

"Well, you heard the man," Dishiva shouted. "Let's show these Torin how it's done. Make dust!"

She didn't have a full complement of Third Swords, but what they lacked in numbers they made up for in volume, cheering and shouting as they turned their mounts off the road and stormed across the plain like a great wave across a beach.

"Chase 'em down!" I shouted, adding my reluctant battle cry to the noise and putting my heels to Jinso's sides as Dishiva disappeared in a ballooning cloud of dust. There was no way through the storm of hoofbeats and flagging tails, but Jinso knew his herd and ran close, slowing with them when walls appeared through a dust cloud laced with screams.

An arrow ripped by, narrowly missing my ear. A cry sounded behind, while ahead a horse fell, its legs giving way, tumbling its rider into the dirt. More arrows whisked past, and amid the dust came a flash of crimson. The charge slowed to a walk as we passed through the gate and into the waiting soldiers, but by the time I arrived, their lines were already broken. Without reinforcements, they couldn't have even hoped to hold us off, and we tore through them. Soldiers ran. More arrows flew. A blade nicked Dishiva's arm and she turned, arcing away into the dust and chaos. A man in crimson ran from Jinso's hooves, throwing himself aside as I leant out, sword in hand, while Jinso trotted over another body in a sea of fallen flags and crumpled paper lanterns.

As I turned back for the man, Levanti swirled around me, circling the square to hack down running soldiers before setting off along darkening roads. A woman screamed, her voice rising to a begging squeal only to cut off abruptly. I turned, hunting the sound, the rapid clack of Jinso's hooves upon the stones speeding my own panicking heart.

*Leave no one standing*, Gideon had said. *No one.*

The soldier I had doubled back for already lay dead, slashed by a dozen curved blades until his skin ran as red as his tunic. More screams echoed.

More shouts. Flames roared as they took to the slanted reed roof of a nearby market stall, cheers rising with the smoke.

A group of children broke from beneath another stall, darting between two horses and out into the square. Gideon had said leave no one standing. Those were the orders. But these were children, their faces alight with fear. The oldest girl gripped the hand of a little boy who tripped and tumbled on the worn stones, his cheeks streaked with tears. She glanced up as they neared, almost close enough that I could lean out, could swing in a great downward curve and catch them all like stalks of wheat.

Once drawn, a sword must taste blood or be forfeit. That was our law, our code, and these were easy kills.

I let the worn leather hilt slip from my fingers. The blade struck the stones and I heard it bounce and strike again, even over the approaching Chiltaen cavalry and the roar of flames.

The oldest girl glanced at my sword then at me, no smile, nothing but a stare of recognition before running on, guiding the others toward a narrow side street as the first Chiltaens streamed into the square, hooves clattering like the rattling tails of a thousand vipers. An arrow leapt the distance. The rider had to rein in his horse to loose it, but the shot was strong and skilful and buried itself in the back of the little boy's skull.

"No!" I was off Jinso in a heartbeat, landing upon a dead man's bloodied chest, but it was too late. It had always been too late. Another arrow had already leapt, followed by still more from other bows. The Chiltaens drew blades and urged their horses off into the madness, leaving the stones strewn with bodies. Small, broken bodies, face down and lifeless.

I stood with one hand upon Jinso's heaving side, unable to move. All around me, plumes of black smoke rose toward the darkening sky like great tree trunks supporting the clouds. Chiltaen soldiers were smashing in the windows of a shop and jeered as a man burst from the door, making a break for it down the stairs. A throwing axe caught him in the back and he fell, wailing, between the smashed remains of two market stalls. The soldiers went on laughing as the man tried to drag his broken body to some imagined safety.

While the others went inside with sacks, one soldier stalked toward the injured man and pinned his leg to the stones with a booted foot. With his jaw jutting, the Chiltaen soldier wrenched his throwing axe free, eliciting a

strangled scream. Though it faded to a gurgle as the man walked away, the Kisian was still not dead. I moved then, telling Jinso to stay put as I drew my knife.

Fingers clenching, the man continued his feeble attempt at escape, though he lay in a pool of his own blood, his cheek to the stones in the fatigue of death.

“I’m sorry,” I said as I crouched at his side, knowing the foreign words would be of little comfort.

The man started babbling and spitting blood.

“I’m sorry,” I repeated. “I will end your pain and set your soul free. I’m sorry.” I began the prayer to Nassus and pierced his throat with the tip of my blade. Blood gushed onto my hand. Light faded from his eyes. And his last words ended in a rattle and a sigh. I continued the prayer as I cut, slicing hot flesh still pliant and alive.

While I worked, the bloodshed continued and more flames leapt to the smoke-choked sky. After I removed the man’s head, I began on the children, their thin necks and fragile bones quick work in comparison. A few Chiltaen soldiers gathered to watch me. Levanti too, neither group speaking to the other, only watching on as Tian burned. By the time I reached the last child—the little boy with the arrow still stuck in his skull—I had a full audience. Unsure. Silent. At least until Gideon arrived, shouting orders to the Levanti to get moving. I was up to my elbows in blood and paid him no heed.

His hand gripped my shoulder and wrenched me off balance. “Get up!”

My knife clattered beside the boy’s head. “Why? I am freeing the souls of the dead. Innocent souls. Is this what you meant when you said leave no one alive? That we should slaughter children?”

“Rah—”

“Is this part of your plan? What happened to our most basic tenets? We do not steal. We do not kill but in protection of the herd. We are Torin, Gideon, not killers of babies and burners of buildings!”

He gripped my bloodstained tunic. “We do not steal. We do not kill. But we fight for our people and our place in the world, whatever the cost, or we die.” He shoved me away. My blood hummed with anger, my stomach sick. “You just have to trust me, Rah. Trust that I know more than you do and there is no other way. We must kill or die, and I know which I would rather

do.”

“I don’t want to die, but I don’t want to do this either,” I said, gesturing blindly at the destruction as tears pricked my eyes. I had chosen this. Accepted this. Let Kishava die for this. The shame burned like a poison in my gut. “You keep talking about trust as though three years has changed nothing. As though you are still the same as the brother I prayed every day would come back from exile. But the Gideon I knew would never have killed innocents. He would never have fought for our enemies.”

Gideon stood stunned as though I had slapped him, a flash of hurt fast buried in anger as his brows contracted. “Don’t be a fool, Rah, I—”

“I was a fool when I agreed to spend the lives of my Swords on this war. If this is your path, then I will not be part of it. I withdraw the support of the Second Swords of Torin. We’ll go back to the old camp and sit in chains rather than take innocent lives.”

A roar of frustration tore from his lips, and with his fingers working like the bloodstained claws of a beast, he snarled in my face. “This is why I made you promise you would fight for me, Rah, before I told you anything else. You’re so damned honourable that you’d go and say something stupid like that and there’d be nothing I could do to stop them killing you.”

The words struck me like a punch to the gut, stealing my breath. “Killing me?”

He jabbed an angry finger in the direction of the nearby Chiltaens. “What do you think they’ve done with the First Swords of Sheth? With the Third Swords of Namalaka? With our wounded and our broken? Do you really think the Chiltaens will feed and care for men who do not fight? Who will not? It is madness to keep an animal that will not work when that food could go to another that will.”

We did not keep sick cattle. Nor did we keep weak horses. Or broken kin. Out on the plain, only the strong survived.

“Amun,” I said, his name a horrified breath. He might have welcomed death from my hand, trusting I would send his soul to the gods, but the Chiltaens would not. “You knew.”

“I knew, of course I knew, that is why I did my best to persuade the captains. And if I had not kept the truth from you then, right now you and your Swords would be dead. I could not let that happen. I could not lose you again.”

I stared at him, this desperate man I no longer recognised. “You let your own people be slaughtered and you don’t even care?”

Gideon clenched his fist as though to strike me, only to shake it in my face. “I care. Enough to risk everything. To give everything. For you. For all of you. Foolish of me to think you would see beyond the tenets Whisperer Jinnit hammered into your head with his cruelty.” He sagged with an exhaled breath and rubbed his hand down his face, turning a slow circle to take in the destruction we had so quickly wrought. The night had grown dark but for the flames, silent but for the ongoing screams and the chatter of soldiers as they dragged away all wealth they could find. “You came too late. You weren’t here when I needed you, and now that you are...”

Gideon looked away into nothing, and despite my anger, I hung on the words he had left unsaid. I wanted to hear them, to understand, to be the brother he needed me to be, but this was not the Gideon I knew, not the Gideon I remembered.

When he turned back, he dragged me into his arms and held me so tight I could hardly breathe, everything from the way he gripped the back of my head to the hiss of his voice in my ear a threat. “You can’t tell anyone else, Rah. No one. You know me, you trust me, but they don’t.”

I stared at him, my heart aching with a grief I could hardly give voice, a grief for the loss of the man still standing before me.

He shook me when I didn’t answer. “Promise me, Rah. They can never know.”

Dumbly, I shook my head. “I don’t want any part in this.”

Gideon stepped back and dropped his arms, a darkness swallowing him. “Too late,” he said. “There’s no going back now. If you refuse to fight, you’ll die and all your Swords with you.”

With one last look, he walked away, firelight dancing upon his short hair and the running ink of his Torin mark. I wanted to call him back, to shout, to shake him, to tell him this was madness and I wanted to go home, but I pressed my lips tight and said none of it.

Not for me, but for those who had followed me into exile. Who had trusted me.

*“And now I know there is no point fighting for honour, for our code and our spirit, if suffering will be the only price,”* Kishava had said, her words a

haunting memory. *“Now I wish Eska had taken us home.”*

## Chapter 15

### Cassandra

The gates closed behind me with a boom of finality. I did not look back and yet they loomed over me, tall and foreboding, the glare of the matron through whose legs I had just escaped. I expected an arrow and the sudden blinding pain of life oozing out through the back of my head, but it never came. Just the sound of my footsteps upon the road and the stretching golden fingers of light from the gatehouse, fading to darkness.

*She* said nothing. She hadn't spoken on the way out of the castle, nor as the guards led us through the city, and now we had been spewed free onto the road, She maintained Her silence.

"Well," I said, keeping my voice low as my boots scuffed the dark road. "Time to get the fuck out of here. We could head north to Parvum and cross the river to—"

*We are not going to Parvum.*

"—get out of Chiltæ while all this shit—"

*We are not going to Parvum.*

I did not stop walking, but I stopped talking. Her voice had an edge it had lacked before. No pleading, no complaining, no whining, just hard, sharp commands. It wasn't an improvement.

*I can hear your thoughts, you know,* She said. *We are going to find the army and seek an audience with the hieromonk, kill him, and go back for the head.*



“You want to kill the hieromonk of Chiltae? After all that complaining that I was even considering killing his son? Fuck off. I’m going to Parvum.”

I kept walking, following the road north that Leo and I had joined only that morning. No clouds crowded the night sky, but the half moon gifted little light, and once I reached the edge of the woods, I would have to stop for the night or risk walking into trees. “I should have asked for a horse. And a lantern. And some food.”

The last of the reaching torchlight lost its hold on us as Koi shrunk to nothing at our back. Ahead, the road continued in darkness.

“Maybe I’ll be able to find some Stiff in Parvum. Fuck but I need some of that.”

*We’re going to find the army camp.*

I kept walking. Nearby, a dead body called to me. They had started their song again back in the city and I had tried to cover my ears like I had as a child, though I knew it wouldn’t work. It wasn’t my ears that heard them sing.

I curled up in a mossy hollow to sleep the darkness away and continued north the next day, staying off the road but keeping it in sight. She said nothing, and liking it that way, I made no reference to our destination or the plans slowly ruminating in my imagination. I was getting too old to keep playing the whore, but a busy trading port on the Eye Sea could be the very place to set up a house of my own and employ younger girls to bring in the clientele. Taking contracts to make or break a merchant’s fortune, rather than a whole nation’s future—those were the sort of stakes that could be fun.

*Ruining people like how the supporters of the Holy Triarchs ruined Aunt Elora?* She said at the end of the second day, because She couldn’t let anything be fun. *I’m sure someone thought that was just business too.*

She had sat in my father’s house after that, broken but existing, alone yet refusing to die, a statue of pride in the face of so much loss.

“Fine, I’ll go work in a shop then. Anything is better than being involved in all this political shit.”

That evening I scrounged up enough wood for a fire, sure I was far enough from anyone who would see it, let alone care. I was hungry and sick of walking and just wanted to curl up and watch the flickering flames with a belly full of charred meat. I had lain down to do just that while thinking of a

nice soft bed, when the vibration of hoofbeats shook the ground beneath me. Gentle at first, the sort of sound that could have easily been a leaping fox, only they continued, rhythmic and growing closer.

“Shit.” I hauled my tired body up and hurried into the shadowy trees, putting distance between myself and the fire that must have lured them. Once I was beyond its reach, I stood breathing heavily in the darkness, the touch of branches on all sides as I crouched to watch. Lit torches approached, hovering like fireflies. A man stepped into the firelight, not the Kisian I had feared but a man in the grey uniform of something infinitely worse.

“Blessed guards,” I mouthed. “What the fuck are they doing here?”

*Looking for Leo? If he had initially planned to travel as his own servant, they might think he’s still alive.*

*But he didn’t travel as his own servant.*

*No, because someone had been contracted to kill Jonus too.*

*He can’t have known that. Not unless he read my—*

More blessed guards arrived at my abandoned fire, and the one who appeared to be their leader pointed out into the night. They spread out.

*Idiots, I said. Carrying torches won’t help them find me; it only helps me avoid them.*

*No, we should give ourselves up.*

*What? Are you mad?*

*There’s no faster way to reach the hieromonk.*

*For the last time, we’re not killing the hieromonk. We’re getting out of this mess and never coming back. I’d rather put up with you whinging back there for the rest of my life than spend a moment longer than I need to in this wretched empire.*

*But I wouldn’t rather that. One more kill, Cassandra. One more.*

*You spend years railing at me for killing people, and now you want me to finish off the head of the faith?*

“No, I want you to free me!” The words spurted angrily from my lips though I had not spoken them.

A shout answered in the distance and running steps crashed through the dark forest. “Fuck!” I tore away from my hiding place, branches scratching my legs.

*No! Stay! Please do this. You have no idea what it is like being trapped*

*inside your head with nowhere to go. To be thought a disease. A monster. Something to be silenced and cut loose. Something to mock and jeer at and ignore and drink away with Stiff.*

I ran on, feet crashing down a slope and hands outstretched in the dark.

*You dangled hope in front of me, hope that I could be free of you, and now I will not let you take that away from me.*

“Just shut up for a minute!” I hissed.

My feet stopped but momentum carried me on and I fell, hitting the ground like a felled tree only to slide through bushes and bracken. At the bottom of the hill I lay stunned and numb. It ought to have hurt more, but glad it didn’t, I tried to roll and push myself up. My body didn’t move. I just lay, sucking pained breaths through the dry leaf litter.

*Hey! No. No, don’t do this,* I said, shouting but silent, my words unable to break through my own lips. *Let me back in. We have to get away from here before they catch us!*

Another shout. The footsteps were getting closer.

*Move, damn it! Move!*

She hauled our body up and gingerly began to walk. Toward the voices.

*No!*

I concentrated on my body, on making my legs stop, and my voice push through its pursed lips. One leg froze at my command but the other continued, knocking me off balance. She cried out as I fell, but to me it felt no more painful than hitting a pile of cushions. Something I could use against her, just like I had on the stairs when she had kissed Jonus.

“Hey!” she cried as I slammed the heel I had control over into the shin I didn’t. She howled. “Stop it! Stop it! Why can’t you just sit back and let me deal with this?”

“Because it’s *my* body!” I said, and I did say it, the words bursting from my mouth. “Why don’t you go and find your own!”

*I got my own for a few days, remember? It was dead and disintegrated with me inside it. It went all stiff and... tight. Then loose like I was falling apart. And it stank. Do you have any idea what that was like?*

“Yes. I felt it. Why do you think I came back for you, you thieving bitch?”

*Thieving—?* She dug my fingernails into the leg I had control of and blood beaded with the pain. *You took control of the only body I ever knew.*

*You threw me aside and you tormented me and broke me and wouldn't let me speak without being mocked and you call me a thief? Who says this body even belongs to you? What if it was mine?*

“It’s mine! It has always been mine! This is my leg and my hand, my voice and my hair and my fucking body. It always has been, it always will be, and I will do whatever I want with it. And that does not include getting caught by blessed guards, so give me that damn leg back.” I started hammering at the leg she controlled with my own bloodstained fist. “Give it back!” I punctuated each word with a thump hard enough to bruise. “We need to get out of here. We are not going to—”

The bushes rustled. A bow creaked. Eyes glinted from the darkness, and I stopped hitting myself as a hooded figure towered over us, all dark grey amid the shadows and streaks of moonlight. He gripped the front of the robe I had been given in place of my bloodied servant dress. “Who the fuck are you?” the man hissed, his grip tightening such that the high collar of my simple robe cut into my throat. “And who are you shouting at?”

“No one. Myself. My name is—” The rest of my words vanished as though I had not the breath to speak them, and yet words kept spilling from my lips. “Big whore woman,” I said. *She* said. “Take me to the hieromonk. I know where his son is.”

Bowstrings drew taut and I was one wrong move away from becoming a pincushion. “His son?” the man said, not loosening his grip. “You know where Dom Leo Villius is?”

“Yes,” *She* said. “But I’m not telling anyone but the hieromonk himself, not even if you hurt—”

I screamed. *You don't say that, you don't say that, you don't* “—fucking say that!” A slap made stars leap before my eyes, sparking like firelight.

The cloaked man hissed. “Shut. Up. Or we will put an arrow through you and leave you for dead, whatever information you have.” It was hard to see his face beneath the grey hood, but he leant in, seeming to narrow his eyes at me. “Hold out your left wrist.”

“Why does everyone keep asking me to do that?”

“Who else asked?”

I swallowed the truth and thrust out my left hand. “Leo.”

“That’s Dom Villius to you,” the torchbearer growled.

Mr. Cloak checked my wrist and let my hand drop. “Interesting.” He

straightened up. “All right, Swift, take half the men and continue looking for His Grace. I’ll get this one back to camp.”

“You don’t really think she knows where he is, do you, Captain?” the torchbearer said.

“No, that’s why I’m leaving you here. I think she’s not all she says she is, however, and we have our orders. You, check her for weapons and let’s get her out of here.”

“Yes, do,” She said. “She’s carrying three knives. One of them is hidden in the boot, don’t forget that one, it—”

I hit her. Me. Fist to the face, the pain blooming in my awareness like a crack of lightning as she retreated, leaving me to face the aftershock with a cry I could not bite back.

Mr. Cloak pressed his hand over my mouth, a hand that smelt of blood and oil and dirt and tasted little better on my lips. At any other time I would have bitten him, would have slammed my heel into his groin and either stabbed him as he doubled over or run, but my own fist had left me stunned.

*What the fuck do you expect me to kill him with?* I said as they took the knives Empress Hana had just returned to me, even yanking out the one in my boot, leaving a sense it was too big for my foot.

*I don’t want you trying to escape. And anyway, if you want to get close enough to kill him, you have to earn their trust, make them think you’re on their side and just want to help them recover Leo.*

*That is bullshit. Let me do the assassination stuff, all right?*

*Then you’ll do it?*

They hauled me up and it took only a few seconds to calculate that my chance of escape wasn’t high. There were too many of them, and thanks to Her, I now had no weapons. And any attempt to escape would only give Her reason to take over my body again, and I would rather kill ten hieromonks than have that happen.

The blessed guards walked me through the forest, torchbearers in front and behind and their cloaked leader at my side. His grip didn’t loosen.

Half a dozen more grey-clad soldiers waited on the road with their horses. “Get up,” Mr. Cloak said, pushing me to mount before him.

“You want to cuddle me?” I said.

“Hardly,” the man returned. “But if it’s attention you want, I’m sure you can find plenty back at the camp. There’s only so many Kisian whores to go

around, and the Levanti girls bite.”

“I don’t blame them. You’re just so tasty.”

She seemed to have shrunk into the back of my mind now. She had what she wanted, and I alone climbed onto his horse, disliking the feel of a blessed guard so close. He reached around me for the reins as though I were some useless maiden. The urge to strangle him was great, but I kept my hands to myself and hoped he would do the same.

The small group of blessed guards urged their horses to a walk and we set off, along the road at first then into the wooded hills, stars and moonlight all there was to show the way. I had grown up in Genova, knew its streets and its markets, its whorehouses and its taverns. I knew where to steal, where to hide, where to work, where to eat, and where to get information of all sorts. There, I could be invisible. Out here, I could build a fire and hunt rabbits, and I owned a decent sense of direction, but these men moved like shadows through the wild night, even their horses placing their hooves to make no sound.

Despite the fact that he had to look over my shoulder to see where he was going, Mr. Cloak wound his horse through the trees with practised ease. His men followed, silent and well-trained and with none of the pomp and fanfare with which the blessed guards usually travelled.

Time passed in a succession of copses and clearings, of gusts of wind and glints of moonlight through gathering cloud. Unable to keep my exhausted body awake, I dropped in and out of a doze, awakened by the occasional snap of a branch or hiss of an order, then at last by the slowing of the animal beneath me. A constellation of firelight appeared upon the hillside as we emerged onto the road. The same road I had been following, which had brought me into Kisia and would take me out again if I walked all the way to Tian. Or perhaps what was left of it. These Chiltaens were on the wrong side of the border.

I clenched my hands upon fistfuls of mane as Mr. Cloak wound his mount through a maze of pit traps to the palisade gates. There he called to the soldiers on duty, and before I could even draw a breath, we were through.

The camp swallowed us whole. Light and movement and noise swirled, mingling with the call of death. Behind us, the rest of the guards slowed to a halt, but Mr. Cloak continued on through the camp at a pace that made

everything rush by—firelight and laughter, smoke and men, and the scent of stew and faeces mixing in a way that made me want to retch.

When at last he stopped, it was before the largest tent in the camp, its shadowy pennons fluttering from high poles and its silken doorway billowing. She had demanded to see the hieromonk, had insisted on his death, but it was I who would have to face him. His Holiness. Nothing before God but everything to his people.

I slid from Cloak's horse onto unsteady feet. He leapt down beside me and thrust back his hood. "Tell His Holiness that Captain Aeneas is here," he said to the single soldier on duty. "Tell him I think I have that woman he was looking for."

"What?" I cried, backing away.

Captain Aeneas the Cloak followed me with his gaze, light falling upon half a face covered in little scars that cut his brow and cheek and puckered the corner of his eye like wrinkles. "You think anyone who wants to see the hieromonk just gets let in? You're special, I hear."

The man on duty outside the hieromonk's tent had turned to speak through the doorway, but a voice from within cut him off. "Ah, Miss Marius," it said. "I hoped to see her soon. Send her in, Captain."

The captain held the silken curtain aside, inviting me to enter. Without knives or knowledge or Stiff, pride was all I had left to compel me on, one foot before the other, into the presence of the second ruler I had met in as many days.

Unlike Empress Hana Ts'ai, His Holiness the hieromonk of Chiltae owned no throne, but he rose from a chair before a map-strewn desk, causing another man to stand too. The second one wore the uniform of a highly ranked military official and Captain Aeneas nodded to them both. "Your Holiness. Legate. We found her in the forest between here and Koi. She says she knows where Dom Villius is too but will only tell you."

His Holiness smiled, spoke, gestured. The man addressed as Legate departed with a bow, and through it all, I could do nothing but stare, because I had met this man before. This man with his pale, uninteresting face, with his dull features and his expressionless eyes, was the nameless man who'd been waiting in my room back in Genava. The man who had promised the Witchdoctor. The man who had sent me to kill Jonus and bring back his head to be absolutely sure Dom Leo Villius died.

“No bow for me, Miss Marius?” the hieromonk said.

I stood straight though I trembled, fatigue and fear and anger all culminating in a sickening swirl in my gut. Captain Aeneas had gone. Outside, the sounds of the military camp went on unchanged, but in here it was just him and me and his eyes boring into my skull.

“You seem quite ill, Miss Marius.”

“I’m fine.”

“Do you have the head I contracted you for?”

“Not yet, but...” Cold spread through me and I could not stop shaking. “You didn’t want Jonus at all, did you? You only sent me for Jonus in case they switched places. The man you really wanted dead was your son.”

The hieromonk smiled a glittering smile. “Cleverer and cleverer. I understand Jonus is dead, but if you want the Witchdoctor, it’s my son’s head I’ll need here in my hand. Where is he hiding?”

“But... he’s your son.”

“Your point?”

“Why? Why do you want him dead? He could have married Princess Miko and brought peace instead of—” I stopped the words spilling stupidly from my lips. We were standing in the middle of an army camp. Peace was not something he sought.

“A bit slow, but you’re getting there,” he said, still faintly smiling. “Although if you’re expecting me to explain all my plans and motives to you, then you’ll be disappointed. You’re good, but you are not worth nearly so much as you think. And will not live long if you don’t bring me Leo’s head.”

I shook my head stupidly. “I can’t,” I said. “I cannot complete the contract.”

“Don’t want to kill the humble man of the poor? Better you do than let yourself be disappointed by the truth.”

“You will have to hire someone else.”

“And just let you go free?”

*Just do what he wants!* She hissed.

*Kill Leo? You spent the whole journey trying to talk me out of doing that.*

*We’re dead if we don’t.*

*And dead if we do. Going back into that city will get us killed just as*



*fast. Better to say we will, then run.*

*But that won't get us the Witchdoctor.*

I stared at the hieromonk's impassive features as Her words washed over me and hoped my incredulity did not show on my face. *You really think we can trust him?*

*I have to if I am ever going to be free of you.*

"You see your predicament," the hieromonk said, breaking my long silence. "You cannot leave here alive knowing all you know, so it's really your life or his. Which is it to be, Miss Marius?"

He bent his head to look right into my face, his breath redolent of wine and dried fruits. "Well? Where is he?"

"Inside the castle."

"Which castle? Koi?" Those pale eyes flashed. "You let him get there? Fool! Your other employer will want your blood as much as—"

"Secretary Aurus can get fucked."

The hieromonk stared, his mouth a little open and his eyes roaming my face for a hungry moment. Then his brittle laugh broke the silence. "I need not ask how you know, of course. Leo." A second laugh became an irritated grunt, as the man who was nothing before God ran through a full gamut of emotions. "A talker, that one."

He sat on a clear corner of his desk, scowling. "Am I now to expect a ransom demand from Emperor Kin for my son's life thanks to your failure? No. I will not meet them. We will take the city—the castle—rather than that. And you will bring me his head."

"I can't. Koi is too well guarded for me to get back in, I—"

His Holiness lifted his hand to stop me. "Get back in. Yes. How did you get out?"

*Tell him everything. There's no other way out of this.*

She was right about that. Play along. Agree. Smile. It was the only way to walk out of the tent alive. "Empress Hana hired me to kill you," I said. "She let me go. They opened the gates and let me leave."

"Hired you to kill..." His voice broke into a peal of laughter like the bells they used at prayers, and I found myself wanting to laugh along. First Dom Villius, then his servant, now the hieromonk himself. It seemed all wanted my blade to make a difference in this war, and all I had wanted was to be free of Her.

“Hired you to kill me!” he almost wailed with laughter, tears sparkling in his eyes. “Oh, that has to be the funniest thing I have heard in ages. Hired you to kill me.”

I stood, controlling my trembling with clenched hands as She started to laugh along with him, the sound of her voice echoing inside my head. *We are so fucked.* She laughed. *If you had let me be in control, we might have had a normal life, but no... nothing but insanity for Cassandra Marius.*

“You’re the one who wanted to come here,” I said.

*You’re the one who took the contracts. You’re the one who chose to kill people. Let’s not forget that.*

The hieromonk wiped away a tear with one long finger. “Ah, Miss Marius,” he said. “I confess I enjoyed that very much. And I should enjoy seeing you attempt it, although then the Witchdoctor would be totally out of your reach. My job first.”

“I’ve told you,” I said though clenched teeth. “I can’t—”

“You can get into Koi and you will,” he said, amusement vanishing from his face as though it had never been there. “If Empress Hana sent you on a mission, then she would let you back in if you spun the right lie. Too foolish of you, Miss Marius. You can get into that city. You alone, in fact. And you can do much more for me there than just bring me my son’s head.”

My stomach dropped. The hieromonk began to pace from silken wall to silken wall, his feet scuffing upon the thick carpet. “Ah, the great impenetrable city of Koi. Did you know that the philosopher Anticine once calculated how many soldiers it would take to enter the castle by force?”

“Upwards of ten thousand.”

“Well read, Miss Marius. Yes, but upwards of ten thousand *uninvited*. You are a welcome guest of the empress. You can open the city and the castle, and if you want to meet the Witchdoctor, you will.”

I stared, owning no voice, no breath, nothing but a shell of horror as his lips split into a smile.

“You will do it, won’t you, Miss Marius?”

A whole city for my chance to meet the Witchdoctor. A whole city. It was so steep a price that even She said nothing. The whole city of Koi. All those people. And the empress, sitting proud and alone upon her throne, her castle draped in mourning. Better to lie as I had to the empress and run as far away as I could.

*No. I want the Witchdoctor.*

*The price is a whole city! And Leo.* I had been glad not to kill him in the end.

*This is a stupid time to pretend you have a conscience. I don't want to live like this anymore. I don't want to be stuck with you anymore. I had all too brief a taste of real life and it was not enough. We are doing this even if I have to force you. Or we could work together, because you want to be free as much as I do.*

For the first time, I agreed with Her, as much as I hated to admit it. I squared my shoulders and stood proud before the hieromonk. "I'll do it."

His split lips turned into a wolf's smile. "Well done, Miss Marius. I knew I had the right woman for the job. I want those gates open the night after next. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I said, and though I hated to I bowed—*bowed!*—to the monster sending us to kill a whole city and behead his own son. "I understand."

"Good." His Holiness turned to the doorway. "Captain? Send for Andrus. And the commanders. And Gideon. We have a new plan."

I hovered a moment, unsure, but She did not sink away into the darkness. She stayed with me until the hieromonk remembered we were there and waved us away. "Captain Aeneas will be keeping an eye on you, so don't bother trying to escape. I'll call for you in the morning to give you your orders."

Again I bowed and together we left, our tongue seemingly stuck to the roof of our mouth.

## Chapter 16

### Miko

The carriage bumped along the road, and propped in its corner, Emperor Kin stared at nothing. For two days we had not stopped but to change horses, had not spoken but to order food or have the dressing of his wound changed, and neither of us had rested. I had tried, bunching my cloak into a pillow, but dreams waited in every doze. Behind my eyes my brother walked, smiled, laughed, and died. There my blade punctured General Ryoji's arm and Commander Ling spilt his life upon the stones. And there, with grief spitting from her lips, Mother drew the blackened bow.

"It's called Hacho," Kin said when I woke from one such dream, covered in sweat.

"What?" I wiped a hand down my face and, despite the heat, tried to snuggle under the carriage blanket. A flash of moonlight lit his face only for darkness to steal him away.

"The bow," he said. "You were talking about it in your sleep. The blackened bow. Hacho."

"But that's old Kisian for—"

"First love, yes. One thing about which your father was honest."

Questions queued upon my tongue. "There are a lot of stories," I said to the dark shape in the corner that groaned when it moved. "About my... my father."

"Yes."

“Are they true?”

“Some.”

“Did he take Koi Castle without a fight?”

A snort became another groan. “Yes and no. He took it but there was blood.”

“How did he take it?”

Silence.

“How did he take it?”

“It is not important,” he said.

“It damn well is important. If he found a weakness that so many others did not, then it can be exploited again. And you said yourself that war...”

I let the words hang, unable to say them now, though they had come so angrily to my lips back in the courtyard, my body the only shield between the emperor and death.

“It will not happen again,” he said. “That particular weakness is dead and gone.”

“Dead?”

“Some things are best left alone. You ought to burn the bow.”

“It looks like it already has been.”

He laughed, but though I could not see his face, the sound owned no humour, only a bitter tang. “Then it should be burned again.”

Silence fell once more between us, and eventually I settled into fitful sleep. In and out of it I dropped until morning light seared my bleary eyes, shocking me awake. I pulled the blanket over my head and sank into my nest, but in considering the what-ifs and the might-have-beens, I found only misery and gave up.

“Where are we going?” I said, peering out the window at the unfamiliar landscape. “This isn’t the road to Mei’lian.”

“Jinanton.”

“Why?”

“Because with your mother having taken control of Koi, I must meet with the generals at the border camp there. They should have received my message and sent four battalions to reinforce Tian, but I do not know where the Chiltaens are and if they are marching and I... dislike being so blind.”

He snapped his mouth shut as though he had said more than he meant and went back to staring out the window at the increasingly dry hills. In a

few weeks, there would be more water than anyone wanted, but until the rains came, summer would go on sucking this part of Kisia dry. We were far from the mountains here, the land around Jinanton parched and scrubby. Too often burned by the fires of war, perhaps, or made dry by the salt that brought the Chiltaens so often to this land. Even Emperor Tianshun's fortress had failed to keep them out of the salt pans.

The carriage began to slow, and Emperor Kin peered through the forward window to see why. "Stop!" He banged on the roof. "Stop the coach!"

The vehicle we had hired in Koi halted, almost throwing me onto the forward seat. "What is it?"

"I don't know, but I don't like it." He shifted enough for me to see through the small window. The road ahead was choked with carts and overladen donkeys, with working oxen and horses and people on foot carrying as much as they could.

Kin drew back into the shadows. "Go and find out what has happened," he said.

"But they will recognise me in this robe."

"Many people wear black robes for mourning, whereas I am the only one allowed to wear this much crimson."

I could not fault his point.

My legs twinged as I dismounted from the coach, but it felt good to stretch them and I walked to meet the oncoming stream of people heading south carrying what looked like half a town with them.

"Don't come this way, turn back!" a man called as I approached. "You'll find only death that way, my lady."

I fell in beside an old woman carrying a basket upon her back and another in her arms. From inside, the shiny eyes of a cat peered out. "Where is everyone going?"

The old woman scowled at me, her bushy brows bristling. "Are you from Soto Village? I told the men they needed to get out there and warn everyone, but who listens to an old woman?"

"Yes, from Soto Village, but no one came with any news. What has happened?"

She harrumphed in a satisfied way. "I told them they ought to, or all those poor people would be left in the path of the ravaging heathens."

“The Chiltaens?”

“Who else? They have burned Tian to the ground and massacred every last man, woman, and child. Katishun too, they say. They say they are marching on Koi, though that sounds like nonsense to me. Why bother to do that when it’s so much easier to cut through the walls at Tirin’s Gap and have done?”

“To Koi?” I repeated, stunned.

“No, don’t you go there. Go south. We’re all going south. Thousands of soldiers dead on the road—no, no don’t go that way. We’re going to Suway. The Chiltaens will never make it that far south. Never have and never will, you mark my words. There are soldiers there that won’t abandon us like the others will.”

My steps slowed and she drew ahead, others grumbling as they had to squeeze around me on the packed road. “Lost, my lady?” a man asked, the weight of his lingering touch belying his kindly smile. “Not a time to be travelling alone. There’s space on my wagon.”

I pulled away. “No, I thank you,” I said and hurried back to where our carriage sat on the side of the road, the driver watching the crowd warily.

“Well?” His Majesty said as I climbed back in. Outside, the tide of people passed, many trying to peer in the window, others suggesting to the driver that he ought to turn around.

“Tian has been destroyed,” I said. “And some other town I can’t remember. She said it was a massacre, and now the Chiltaens are marching on Koi. We have to go back.”

“Go back? Go back to where the Chiltaens are marching when we have no army? Go back to get trapped in a besieged city? Go back to be executed by your mother? No. We must get to the camp. I need to know where my battalions are and exactly what happened at Tian.” He banged on the roof again, only to hiss and grip his side where Ryoji’s blade had pierced. “Drive on,” he said through gritted teeth.

I reached out, more instinct than thought, but he pulled away. “It’s fine.”

“But, Your Majesty,” the driver spoke through the grating. “What about the people?”

“Drive through them if you must. We need to move now.”



The people choking the road considerably slowed our progress, and we arrived in the last of the daylight. As we approached the camp along a pitted stone road, Emperor Kin began rubbing at the creases in his robe, but to no effect. My own robe was stained with dried blood and carried a musty stink, having been upon my body, unchanged, for two long days inside a stuffy carriage in high summer. Not even the finest laundry maid could save it now.

The carriage slowed, but when the driver called His Majesty's name to the guards, the gate was opened with such alacrity we did not stop. I peered out the window as the carriage swept in through a rough wooden wall and turned, drawing toward a pair of lanterns. Like a boat pulling into harbour, we came to a graceful halt, the clatter of hooves and wheels finally ceasing. The door opened and without a glance at me, Emperor Kin stepped out.

"Your Majesty," came the welcoming voices, and I quickly tucked my daggers beneath my stained sash before following, Katashi Otako's black bow clutched in my hand.

We had been in the carriage so long the ground felt unsteady beneath my feet and every part of my body ached, but I tried for something approaching the stiff, regal grace that had been trained into me.

"Your Highness!" All around the carriage, soldiers had gathered to bow to their emperor, and I received the same ripple of respect as they bent once again. "Our poor camp is humbled by the honour of your presence."

The man speaking wore the uniform of a general and the worn face of an old soldier. "Jikuko," Emperor Kin said, striding up to him and laying hands upon his shoulders in a way that would have been considered shocking inside the throne room. "We have no need of such formality, I think. Not after all these years, nor in such circumstances."

General Jikuko grimaced, a look made all the more frightening in the torchlight. "I admit I am glad to see you." He glanced around, meeting the gaze of another, slightly younger man also dressed in a general's surcoat. "Come, eat with us, Your Majesty. General Shoki and I were just about to take our evening meal."

"I will walk the camp first and you can brief me on the situation while I



do. Then I will need fresh clothes before we can eat and talk.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty.”

The emperor strode forward and the old general fell in beside him. Torchbearers followed, and with no one showing any signs of telling me what to do, I joined them, staying a step behind in the hope neither man would notice.

“I have had no news for two days,” Emperor Kin said as they drew away from the crowd that had gathered to greet us. “Except some hearsay from people on the road. When I left Koi, the empire was not under attack and we had plans in place.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. It wasn’t and we did, but it seems the Chiltaens—”

General Jikuko broke off as Emperor Kin stopped to greet a pair of soldiers sitting at their evening meal. “Yes, Captain Zann, I remember,” Kin said after the men gave their names and ranks. “You were commended in the last skirmish with the northern mountain tribes. It is fortunate Kisia has such men as you to defend her.”

The man stammered out thanks and spilled some of his food when he bowed, but the emperor just smiled and walked on, prompting Jikuko as soon as they were out of earshot of the stunned soldiers. “The Chiltaens...?”

“That army they were massing—”

“Not far from Tian, yes. The one we had gotten very skilled at mutually pretending wasn’t there while manoeuvring as though it was.”

“Yes, that one. Well, either they doubled the number of those Levanti warriors they had there in the last season or there were more than we knew about. Or they’re even more dangerous in the field than we thought.”

Emperor Kin walked a few paces without answering, lifting his hand and nodding to greet soldiers as though they had been old friends. “That’s a lot of ‘or’s, Jikuko.”

“Yes, Your Majesty, but we don’t have an answer yet. With the reports I’ve had today, it could be all three.”

“What *do* we know? And no sweetening the news for me, you know me better than that.”

“Well, as per your message, the four battalions we had waiting in Ustaka set out three days ago and never made it to Tian. Dead, all, barring a few that managed to flee. Tian fell that night, and...”

The emperor stopped walking. “And?”

“And everyone inside the walls was slaughtered.”

“Everyone?”

“Everyone.”

For a few long seconds, each met the other’s gaze, then His Imperial Majesty heaved the sigh of a tired man and walked on.

“People are saying it’s a holy war,” General Jikuko said as they continued their meander through the camp, halting now and then to speak to soldiers and receive prayers. “That we are being punished for the death of Dom Leo Villius. Oh yes, that news has spread far, Your Majesty, and though the Chiltaens were already massing before it happened, the common people don’t think like that. And you ought to know, I have good information to say the hieromonk of Chiltae rides with them.”

“Something tells me Leo Villius was a dead man, Tanaka or no.”

The sound of my twin’s name made my heart race, made me conscious of my own presence in the shadowed space behind them, but neither man seemed to notice.

“I would say so, yes,” Jikuko agreed. “I think the prince did them a favour they were already planning to do themselves. Any chance he—?”

“No. I will acquit him of that. He might have been manipulated into it, but he wouldn’t knowingly have helped their cause however much he wanted war.”

Such a conversation, so open and easy and lacking all pretence. The general spoke to his emperor as one would a trusted friend, nothing like the stilted conversations at court with their layers of intricate meaning and veiled threats and lies, alliances shifting over every bowl of tea. This was an Emperor Kin I had never seen, the Soldier Emperor, so at ease in a military camp, so welcome, so respected, that all doubt I had made the right choice back in Koi fled. This was the man the empire needed right now.

The man who had killed my brother. Who hated my family.

That was where Kin had failed. Where Mother had failed. Where Tanaka had failed. Ruling an empire ought never be personal. I could not do the same, could not let old grievances and present hurts make decisions that would affect thousands. Yet as I followed on in silence, I clutched Katashi Otako’s blackened bow and thought of the dead brother it had surely been meant for.

Whether he had truly forgotten my presence or not, Emperor Kin showed no surprise to find me with them when they arrived at the large central tents, but General Jikuko grimaced. “I’m afraid we have no women here to attend Her Highness, nor any robe fit for a—”

“That is no problem, General,” I said. “A clean uniform will be just fine.”

His eyes widened, but when the emperor made no complaint, he gave the orders. I was given a tent to change in, a bowl of tepid washing water, and a thick comb. I did my best, peeling away the layers of my ruined mourning robe and cleaning every bit of me I could reach, but it took so long to comb my hair and figure out the mysteries of the layered uniform that by the time I rejoined them, food had already been served and the younger general, Shoki, was pouring wine.

Both generals froze at the sight of me, and for a terrible moment, it seemed Emperor Kin would refuse to let me join them in a space not meant for women, but with something of a reluctant smile, he gestured to an empty place at the table. “You look well in uniform,” he said by way of greeting. “Though your straps are twisted and soldiers tie their sashes the other way.”

Of course they did. I had not accounted for the fact I had always been looking at them face on as though in a mirror. I forced out a laugh even as I died a little inside. “I will take it as a triumph that I got so little wrong on my first try, Your Majesty.”

He lifted his wine bowl in a sort of salute as I knelt at the table. “A wise way to look at it. We were just discussing the best location to meet the Chiltaens in battle. You have opinions about everything, why not share them on this topic too.”

All three men stared at me. I had learnt to fight because Tanaka had refused to take lessons without me, I had learnt history and geography and administration the same way, learnt about military districts and supply requirements and the name of every noble who sponsored soldiers and in which standing battalions, but under their looks of kind interest, it all seemed to fade to nothing, and I wished I had curled up in my tent and sought sleep rather than forcing my way in where I did not belong. “I... I...” I stammered into red-faced silence, looking down at my clasped hands. “I’m not sure. But if the Chiltaens intend to lay siege to Koi, then surely

that is as good a place as any. They can't escape with the city behind them and our armies in front."

Kin looked to the younger general. "What do you think about that, Shoki?"

"I... think it is unlikely they will sit their whole army outside Koi. A few hundred men to keep the city garrison imprisoned inside, perhaps, but no more. Koi has never fallen, and they won't waste time with it now when there is easier prey."

"And sitting outside it just makes them targets," General Jikuko added with an apologetic grimace my way. "As you say, it makes a logical place to attack them, and they would be vulnerable there."

"But Koi has fallen before," I said. "It—"

"Not to a Chiltaen it hasn't." Kin stared at me over the table. "That is different."

"But it isn't. If Katashi Otako can find a way in, then any—"

"Katashi Otako is dead. And so are the monsters who helped him get inside the walls." In the silence, he took a sip of wine and set his bowl down with a grunt of distaste. "It sounds to me like meeting these Levanti in the field would put us at a disadvantage; we cannot treat them as we would the Chiltaens."

"But there cannot be more than a thousand of them," Jikuko said, happy to continue the conversation as though I had never arrived. "So for the most part, we would still be fighting Chiltaen foot soldiers."

"Why risk your own men when you have barbarians to lead the charge? If we meet them head on, we'll have to face those horse warriors before any Chiltaen pikeman."

They spent the rest of the meal pretending I wasn't there and I let them, hoping they might forget I was and talk on late into the night, letting me drink in all the wisdom I could hold, but no sooner had the plates been cleared than Emperor Kin fixed me with a look that proved he had not forgotten my presence even for a moment. "Time you rested, my dear. We leave for Mei'lian in the morning."

We. It was a small triumph, but I would take it. I wasn't sure I'd convinced him to name me his heir, but even if he had a different reason for keeping me with him, it was better to stay close, to know where he was and what he was doing rather than make my way alone. So I smiled, bent into

low bow, and bid them goodnight.



It took four days to reach Mei'lian and they were four days too many. Starved of all but the most basic information, we couldn't reach the city fast enough. But this was no imperial carriage and no guards led the way, so even when we reached the capital it was slow going. People pressed close in the busy streets—someone even shouted at us for taking up the road and banged on the old coach door—and when the coachman drew up outside the palace gates, one of the guards ordered him to drive on.

“If it's a delivery, it goes to the side gate,” the guard said.

“Not a delivery. I think you'd better open the gates.”

The guard peered in through the carriage door and nearly dropped his spear along with his jaw. “Your Majesty. Your Highness.” He bowed low. “My apologies. We were not... I don't... Open the gate!”

The wooden gate creaked upon its heavy hinges. “You shall be rewarded for your quick wit, soldier,” His Majesty said to the bowing guard. “It would have been embarrassing for us all had you refused me entry to my own palace because I came in the wrong carriage.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the man said, rising only to bow again. “Thank you, Your Majesty. Welcome home.”

He shut the carriage door and the vehicle trundled slowly in. An imperial carriage would drive all the way through to the emperor's entrance before heading to the coach house, but the coachman had no idea where to go and so halted in the square just inside the gates. There, another guard opened the carriage door, and dressed in the very uniform he would have worn when he was still General Kin, the emperor stepped out.

“Send for the Lord Chancellor—ah, no need, he is already here.” A courtyard of smooth flagstones led from the gate to the main doors of the outer palace, and there with a flotilla of guards bustled Lord Chancellor Goro, at speed and clearly agitated. “Your Majesty,” he said as soon as he came within earshot. “This is quite a shock. Rumours of your death—”

“Are, as always, greatly exaggerated, Lord Goro. Have a servant meet me in my rooms. I need fresh clothes and something to eat. And gather my

war council. I want them all here within the hour. Where is Minister Manshin?”

At mention of the minister’s name, I thought of Lady Sichi for the first time in what felt like weeks, and I could only be glad I had given her no assurances that morning in the bathhouse. Every single one of our plans had come to nothing, and the man she had spent her life betrothed to was dead.

“I’m afraid I’m not sure where His Excellency is this morning, Your Majesty,” the chancellor said, his gaze slipping to me. “We... received word from Koi. Do allow me to—”

“Koi is, at present, not under imperial control, and I will not waste time on considering its fate while my empire is under attack. The war council, Chancellor. Now.”

“Yes, Your Majesty, of course.” His gaze lingered on me, but he asked no questions. “At once.”

As the chancellor hurried off, Kin scowled around the entrance square, empty of all but guards. Many seemed to be staring at the bow in my hand though I carried no arrows. “Lots of people died here.”

My grip tightened on my dead father’s bow. “Your Majesty?”

“So many. The burial mounds were enormous. He wasn’t even using the bow by then.”

I shivered, a chill seeming to emanate from the weapon in my hand. But Emperor Kin did not look at me. He was looking somewhere else, or somewhen, his face suffused with colour.

“Are you all right, Your Majesty? Perhaps that wound—”

“It’s fine.”

He made to stride toward the outer palace doors, but one foot stumbled upon the other. I gripped his arm. “Majesty,” I said in a low voice. “You ought to call the physician. You ought to rest. You—”

I wanted to point out he was old and frail, but he turned a glare on me and the rest of the words congealed in my mouth.

“No,” he said.

“At least have it freshly dressed, Master Akio—”

“No.” He wiped his brow. “There is too much to do.”

He pulled away from my hold and strode into the palace, leaving me more alone than I had ever felt before. This palace had always been my home. Tanaka and I had been born here, Edo had come to live here, and

here Shishi and I had walked in the gardens every day while I plotted to escape my prison. Now I stood at the end of a journey while the world carried on without me, in spite of me, caring nothing for what I had done and what I had lost. I squeezed my eyes shut and let out a long slow breath, clasping the black bow tight.

Limbs heavy with fatigue, I made my way slowly through the outer palace and across the gardens, walking without thought the path I had walked a thousand times, into the inner palace and up through the grand stairways to my rooms—rooms I had left some weeks ago to summer at Koi back before the world had broken. A maid waited for me there, but she was not Yin. Clothes waited, but they were not the ones I had taken with me. The inner palace even sounded different. Most of the court were at their estates for the summer, or had been in Koi. Along with our guards.

And Tanaka.

I sent the maid away. Tears ought to have come then, but perhaps I was too tired for grief, too tired for anger, too tired for anything but to sit and stare out the window. There a moment of silence. Of safety. Temporary. Fleeting. Sleepily, I reached out to pat Shishi and found only matting.

The maid, Ai, returned with a tray of food. She set it down and bustled about much as Yin would have done, cleaning and brushing my hair and helping me dress in a proper robe, each act one of rebuilding, of bringing life back to my bones, until Princess Miko knelt upon the matting once more. Ready then to bend my mind to the question of the future. I could no longer rule the empire with Tanaka, but Emperor Kin might yet name me his heir.

“I will prove them all wrong,” I muttered. Prove that not all Otakos are monsters. That a woman can sit on the throne. That it is possible to rule fairly without being blinded by old anger and hurt.

“Pardon, Your Highness?”

“Oh, nothing. Just thinking aloud.”

Ai gathered up my soiled uniform. “Is there anything else I can do for you now, Your Highness?”

“No, but don’t get rid of that,” I said. “Wash it and bring it back; I wish to keep it.”

She allowed herself not so much as a twitch of surprise. “Very good, Your Highness.”

The palace had been blanketed in peace since our arrival, but as she opened the door to leave, noise filtered in from the passage. The sound of many harried voices.

“What is going on?” I said.

“I don’t know, Your Highness. Shall I go and see?”

“No. I’ll go.”

From the door, I followed the sound and found His Majesty’s war council in the passage outside his rooms. Lord Gadokoi, minister of the right, saw me first and made an exaggerated grimace.

“What is going on, Excellency?” I demanded, hunting the crowd for the emperor.

“It is His Majesty, I’m afraid, Your Highness,” he said, and around him they all stopped talking to bow. “He collapsed while we were waiting for Minister Manshin.”

“Tired after such a hard journey,” struck in Captain Kitado, though he appeared to be wearing the surcoat of the commander of the Imperial Guard, which only added to the strangeness of the scene. Of course General Ryoji had needed to be replaced, but—

Commander Bo of the city guard agreed with a solemn nod. “It is to be expected at his age. He should be made to rest more often.”

“One does not make His Imperial Majesty rest,” I said, daring to stand as an equal before men I had never so much as spoken to. “His Imperial Majesty rests when he chooses. Where is he?”

“Young Akio has just now helped him to his mat. It is a pity Master Kenji is still at Koi.”

“They may yet have more need of him than we,” I said, donning my mother’s commanding attitude like a cloak. “You may all return to your meeting and I shall bring word of His Majesty as soon as there is some.”

Surprised brows rose, but they could not have been more surprised than me when they obeyed, bowing one after another and departing along the passage. Once their voices faded away, I entered the emperor’s rooms, my dread heavy.

Emperor Kin lay upon a mat in his sleeping chamber with Master Akio and two hovering novices in attendance.

“Your Highness!” Akio got to his feet and bowed, his cheeks red. Part of his training to take over from Master Kenji had been to tend Tanaka and me



through our childhood years, and the experience had left him unable to look me in the eye. He regarded my feet instead.

“Master Akio.” I stared at the still form of Emperor Kin upon his mat. “He isn’t—?”

“Isn’t...? Oh no, not dead, at least...” He wiped his hands upon the clean rag hanging from his sash and glanced toward the open door. “The wound in his arm will be all right, but the other is bad. Even if it had been properly treated, it wouldn’t...” Akio clicked his tongue.

“Other?”

“From the same strike, it looks like. Slashed the arm and pierced his side. I will do all I can, but I doubt even Master Kenji could fix him this time. The master often says His Majesty never fully recovered from his burns. He almost died then and has been slowly dying ever since.”

“Aren’t we all?” I said. “I know he’s getting old, but he cannot die now. Not yet.”

A coughing laugh came from the mat. “Not going to say you told me so?” Kin said, his voice a growl. “Your mother would be disappointed.”

I knelt, leaving Akio to shower his novices with instructions.

“Your Majesty, I—”

“No time,” he said and opened his bloodshot eye. “I knew this was coming from the moment the blade went in. I hoped I’d have enough time to at least set the rest of the army in motion, but it looks like the gods will get the last laugh after all, and your mother her dearest wish.”

Akio knelt beside me, but when he made to wipe the sweat from Kin’s face, he was waved away. “Go,” Kin said. “Leave us. When we have finished here, you may do whatever you wish with me, but I will talk now while I can.”

“But Your Majesty, you’re—”

“Dying no matter what you do. Now out. All of you.”

The physician and his novices departed, and as the door slid closed, Emperor Kin gripped my hand. “Listen. First I need you to send for Minister Manshin. He was out at one of the city garrisons, but I need him here now. Then you need to write to Edo. We need the Bahains. Grace Bahain was a loyal minister before he became Duke of Syan. He must be made to remember that. *You* must help him and his son remember that, else we will struggle to make a stand at Risian.”

“At Risian? That far south? What of the battle you were planning with General Jikuko?”

Kin shook his head, not lifting it from the pillow. “One battle does not end a war. Jikuko cannot hope to do more than dent their force in a single encounter with only a pair of battalions at his disposal. We need the Bahains before the Chiltaens get much farther. Shimai is weak and will surrender. Mei’lian is old and leaky. The stand must be made at Risian, on our terms, not theirs.”

“Can you not order Grace Bahain to bring the eastern battalions to—?”

“I did. And I gave him back his son, fulfilling my side of the bargain. He may refuse to see through his however.”

“But you’re the emperor. He must fight for you.”

“Disabuse your mind of such a fancy, girl.” Kin laughed. “Men fight when it’s in their interest to fight, when their leaders offer riches of gold and righteousness. And sometimes they fight because it’s their job or because if they don’t they will die. Grace Bahain is the second most powerful man in Kisia, and he wants to punish me for keeping his son and for not starting a war with Chiltæ myself.” His grip on my arm tightened painfully, and he closed his eye a long moment during which I dared not speak. Gradually, his rapid breathing slowed, but when he opened his eye again it watered. “It seems I had enough determination left to get here and not much more.”

“Akio will help—”

“No, Miko, I’m running out of time. Listen to me. These last few days you’ve proved yourself a better daughter than I expected or deserved. What you did in Koi saved my life, but I will not give you the throne. Kisia isn’t ready for an empress to rule in her own right, nor can it risk another Otako. All pride and stubbornness and selfish determination.” He attempted to sit up only to fall back with a groan. “Like your mother and your—”

“Then who?”

“My son and heir, born to Lady Emiko Oyamada eleven years ago.”

*Son.* The word reverberated like a gong inside my head. Eleven years ago, he had fathered a son. And Mother had never known.

“He is young yet,” the emperor said, pride in his hoarse voice. “But with his grandfather and Grace Bachita acting as regents, he will have time to learn. He will—”

I clenched my teeth. My hands. My toes. “A child? When Chiltae is burning through our cities? We need a leader not a boy! You *had* an heir. If you had just accepted him, just taken him under your wing and taught him what he needed to know, taught him what being an emperor really meant, Tanaka would have—”

“I would rather have seen *all* Kisia burn than have given Tanaka Otako the throne,” he spat, writhing to rise upon his pillow like a snake tangled in linen. “You...” He jabbed his finger at me, his voice throbbing with anger. “You have surprised me, but he was everything your father was and more, everything your grandfather was. He made all the same mistakes. It was a *joy* to watch him die. I knew what your mother was doing. I knew Lord Roi had his claws in him. I knew no son of Katashi would sit and do nothing, would wait to be killed or overlooked when the throne was right there. His throne—don’t make the mistake of thinking he would have shared that power with you, whatever he might have said.”

Words failed me. Fury mixed with disgust, and I clamped my lips, able to do nothing but shake my head. “You said you had no choice,” I managed at last. “You said you weren’t our enemy.”

“And I did not lie. Truth is just more complicated than any single utterance.”

“I hate you.”

“Even that isn’t the whole truth.”

Long had I feared and despised this man, yet I had come to respect him. To pity him. I had protected him from my mother’s wrath and believed he could save us. Even knowing all he had done to see my brother dead, I could take no revenge. I wanted him to live. Needed him to live.

Fists clenched, I lifted my eyes to the smoke-stained beams and let out a suppressed roar of frustration, the need to curb my rage for fear of who would hear me only making it stronger. “Whatever pity I might have been moved to feel for you before is well and truly gone,” I growled, rising stiff and trembling to my feet with my hands still balled. “You think yourself so good. You think yourself so wise, but you are nothing but a coward with the biggest blade. You sent assassins after *children* to hurt the woman who gave you another man’s heirs. You spent more energy fighting her than any enemy. And whatever reasons you deceive yourself with, you killed her son because she loved my father more than she had ever loved you. Akio!”

The door slid and the physician stood on the threshold, his back hunched and his eyes averted as though he feared to be struck. “Your Highness?”

“Your finest work please, Master Akio; His Majesty’s empire needs him.”

“Of course, Your Highness, but—”

“No buts. I need him alive.”

From the mat, Kin laughed. “Your mother once said those very words.”

“Something she no doubt came to regret. Now if you will excuse me.”

“Miko—”

“No,” I turned on him, tears spilling though I had tried so hard to hold them back. “No. You have done your talking. You have spat your cruelty. You have had your petty revenge. You killed my brother and I wish I could want you dead, but I cannot. Must not.” I spun back to Akio. “He lives or you die.”

“Y-yes, Your Highness.”

I strode toward the door. “I want frequent reports,” I said.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Make sure he rests until I return with Manshin.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“And if you say ‘Yes, Your Highness’ one more time, I will feed your balls to the tigers.”

Silence followed me out, broken only by my sobs and Kin’s dry laughter.



I informed the council that Kin had collapsed due to fatigue, then waited for Minister Manshin to arrive. Since no full war council could meet without the man in command of Kisia’s army, a messenger had already been sent for him, leaving me nothing to do but pace and think.

A son. A *son*. An eleven-year-old bastard nobody, and all because my mother had refused to give him another heir. And I would be shunted aside, married off or killed, the latter the most likely if Grace Bachita had any say in the decision. I had only met the emperor’s cousin twice, but even as a child, I had felt his hate like one feels the heat of a flame. Given the chance,

he would purge the whole court, including the onetime Otako loyalist I was currently waiting for, and fill every position with loyal southern lords in debt to the Ts'ai.

I glared at the statue of Qi as I paced the entrance hall. "You leave him alone, all right?" I said to the god of death. "He can't die. Not yet."

Minister Manshin arrived in the middle of the afternoon, a palanquin setting him down upon the sun-baked steps. The man who emerged from it ought not to have fit inside, so tall and imposing a figure did he strike with his sombre robe and severe expression. Despite the fine silk and the intricately knotted sash, he approached up the steps with all a general's military precision. "Princess Miko," he said, bowing without betraying any surprise. "I must have kept His Majesty waiting long indeed for him to send you to meet me. Unfortunately, the business at—"

"I am not sent to chastise you for your tardiness, Minister," I said. "I am here to inform you that His Majesty has taken to his mat, ill. I am tasked with receiving your report on his behalf while he is resting."

I had practiced those words over and over and they had sounded much better in my head. Looking up into Minister Manshin's blank face, I had only doubts. Did ministers even make reports? Had I given myself away already?

"Ill?" the minister said at last and gestured with a hand to show we should move out of the sun. "Nothing too serious, I hope. If I had known, I would have put off the important business at the garrison."

"You take your responsibilities very seriously, don't you, Excellency?" I said, stepping into the outer palace at his side.

"As should all who take the oath to serve Kisia."

"Yes, but do they?"

It was too strong a question too soon, and I chastised myself to the beat of our footsteps. *Fool. Why would this man ever think about allying himself with you, anyway?*

"I would hope they do, Your Highness, though perhaps it is easier for some than others. Easy to give much when you have much, and to give all when you fear nothing."

And all her life, Lady Sichi Manshin had been kept at court; His Majesty neither refusing her marriage to Tanaka nor giving it his blessing, a limbo state designed to ensure her father's loyalty.

“And what is it that you fear, Minister?”

“The same things all men fear, Your Highness.”

We had strayed far from my practiced lines and my own fear almost stayed my tongue, but I had more to lose in silence than I had in speech, so I said, “For your position and your estate, and perhaps... for your daughter.”

He had shown little emotion until that moment, but at mention of Sichi he turned, a notch of confusion there and gone between his brows. “I heard about Prince Tanaka. You must feel his loss immensely and I am sorry for it.”

“My thanks for your kind thoughts. I am also sorry for the blow his loss deals your family, and I hope Sichi will make a good marriage elsewhere.”

“At present, I will take knowing she is alive and well over her marriage, Your Highness.”

“I am sure she is; she always returns from her summer stay with smiles.”

“This year she was to visit her grandmother near Tian, and I have not heard from her since...”

He let the words hang, once more leaving us with nothing but the echo of our steps for company.

“I am so sorry,” I said, a breathless whisper all I could manage as I thought of Sichi’s desperate plea for knowledge that morning in the bath. “I did not know.”

“No, Your Highness, of course you did not. My estate is north of Suway, on the river, and many of my family are spread throughout the north.”

“Yet you are here. Minister, I meant what I said earlier about your devotion to your duty but I say it now with even greater vehemence. Kisia is fortunate to have you fighting for her in such a time of need.”

I had spoken with my heart and not my head, and my heart thumped hard as Manshin stopped to face me. We had reached the gardens, the inner palace stretching to the sky in the centre of them like an island in a green sea. “Your words humble me, Your Highness,” he said. “I can only hope His Majesty sees things the way you do. Without Sichi and Tanaka...” He stared off into the sweltering gardens, squinting at the bright sunlight. “Let us just say he has no assurances anymore, and in times of war it is easy to see enemies everywhere. Thank you for your company, Your Highness. I think I will walk on alone and give some thought to all you have said. I will

have all my proposals planned for whenever His Majesty is feeling well enough to hear them.”

He bowed and stepped into the long colonnade that led from the inner palace to the outer and almost I let him go. But I had fought death too many times to accept even the possibility of it now and dashed after him.

“Minister, wait,” I said, glad the colonnade was empty but for us. “I was not entirely honest with you earlier.”

Minister Manshin stopped again. “A very common occurrence at court. In what way, Your Highness?”

“He isn’t ill. He’s dying. He may not last the night, let alone the week.”

As though he had not heard, the minister resumed his slow progress along the colonnade, and I walked with him. Out in the gardens, insects buzzed and dozens of brightly coloured birds were taking advantage of the still pools to drink and bathe. “Dying?”

“Yes. A bad wound sustained escaping from Koi in the coup.”

My mother’s coup. Words left unsaid.

“And his heir?”

He flicked a sidelong look my way, but I shook my head. “A bastard son. A child. With Grace Bachita as his regent.”

The minister went on walking as though there could be nothing more mundane than our conversation, but something in his bearing stiffened, and emboldened I said, “Yes. You and I would both be gone and Kisia much the poorer for it.”

“It is not safe to speak so, even here where we appear to be alone.”

The reprimand stung. “I have spent my whole life looking over my shoulder and being careful never to speak, never to be seen, but only my life was at stake then. This is the empire we are talking about. Of handing control of the army to someone without any experience and the throne to a child who cannot ride into battle. Tell me you think Kisia will be better for it and I will swallow my treason and leave you be.”

“Kisia will not be the better for it but perhaps she will not be the worse. I have put my faith in Emperor Kin this long, I will not stop believing now. Just because I do not see the wisdom that has prompted his choice does not mean it isn’t there.”

“Wisdom?” I breathed. “Hatred, you mean. The need to be sure my mother will suffer long after he has gone. If—”

Again the man stopped walking. "I admire your passion, Your Highness. Whoever else it might have angered, I would not have been sorry had he named you or your brother as his heir, but it is not to be. You must accept your place and do what you can to serve your empire with what you are given. That is all any of us can do."

Another bow and he walked on. This time I did not go after him, did not call him back, just stood numb and watched him go as my plans crumbled around me.

Now more than ever, I needed Kin to live.

After a walk in the gardens to dry my tears, I returned to the emperor's rooms where Kin lay sweating and fretful amid a miasma of incense. At his head, Minister Manshin sat with a lap table and quill. He nodded to me and I to him. "We have discussed plans as best we could in the circumstances," he said, setting the table aside and rising. "I will leave you with him now. Your Highness. Majesty."

He departed at speed as though afraid I would speak to him again, and with nowhere else to go and a mind stubbornly refusing to find a way out of this, I sat in the spot Minister Manshin had vacated and watched Akio work. Afternoon became evening, and only a knock upon the outer door roused me from my abstraction.

Lord Chancellor Goro stood out in the passage, his lips in their customary pucker as though he had just eaten a lemon. A maid stood behind him, holding a tray. "Ah, Your Highness. I have just come to enquire when His Majesty would like the council recalled."

I stared at him. "When he would like...?" I repeated dully. "Did Minister Manshin not tell you?"

"Tell us what?" The man sniffed and looked around me into the room.

"That... that the meeting must be postponed until the morning. The minister came to see His Majesty already but the emperor is... is asleep now. So... if you could just leave the tray here on the table in case he wakes..." I hurried to the sleeping room door and, when Akio looked a question, slid it shut in his face. "And of course if he should wake sooner, I will inform the council."

The chancellor had taken two steps into the room with the maid and hovered now as she set it on the table. "You will?"

"Yes, His Majesty requested that I remain and wake him if there is



any... important news.”

With the maid finished her task, the chancellor had no excuse to linger and departed with a stiff “Your Highness.”

Taking a deep breath, I let it out slowly, a hand pressed to my chest to feel the drumming of my heart. I had just lied to the chancellor, but that the minister hadn’t told them felt important.

“Your Highness.” Akio stuck his head out between the sliding doors. “I think... I think you ought to summon the chancellor back, and the ministers. I do not think His Majesty will last much longer.”

“Didn’t I say letting him die was not an option?”

Pity creased his honest face. “I am sorry, Your Highness, but bodies care nothing for orders and death cares nothing for rank. Do what you will, but I can do no more for him. The court must prepare.”

“Is he asleep?”

“He comes and goes. He spoke lucidly to Minister Manshin in the beginning, but not for the last half an hour. Well, he talks, but...”

I went to the door. Kin lay muttering on the sleeping mat. “You play a manipulative game, Laroht, but I’ll win this time, old friend.”

“Who is he talking to?”

Master Akio shrugged. “I don’t think he’s talking to anyone, though I believe he had a minister by that name before my time.”

“Yes, I think he mentioned him once.” I let out a long breath. “And Mama, too.” Damn them and their secrets. They had kept so much pain buried, only for it to spill out over the empire in a stream of death. And having let it go so far, Kin was going to get out of fixing it by dying.

“Takehiko?” He spoke the name in a hoarse whisper as I knelt beside him.

“Your Majesty?” I said. “It’s me, Miko. You had better not be dying.”

“When you see your mother, Takehiko,” he said, his eyes fluttering. “Tell her... tell her I always loved her. Tell her...”

A long breath eased out between his lips and I gripped his hand. “Your Majesty?”

Akio knelt beside me and pressed his fingers to Kin’s wrist, then to his throat. The healer stilled. “He’s gone,” he said. “His Majesty is dead.”

“No,” I said. “No. Bring him back.”

“I can’t, Your Highness, it... it doesn’t work like that.”

I gripped Kin's face between my hands. "Your Majesty." I shook him. "You cannot leave. I command you to stay."

He did not answer. He did not move. Not a sound, not a blink, not a groan. Nothing. Already the lines and stresses seemed to be fading from his face.

"Don't go," I said. "I still need you. This isn't how it was supposed to end."

Still Kin did not move, and like a weight sinking my stomach, the enormity of it all crept upon me. Dead. No longer alive. His heart no longer beating, his lungs no longer drawing breath, and in a few hours he would start to stink.

And he had chosen a bastard boy to take his place.

A sob escaped my lips before I could swallow it, and I turned from Kin to stare blindly at the matting floor. Outside, the empire went on unchanged, not yet knowing their emperor was dead.

"With your permission, Your Highness, I shall inform the chancellor," Akio said, the matting crackling under his knees as he rose.

"No."

Akio stopped. "No?"

"No." I got to my feet and went to him, my mind alive with a new idea. I had lied to the chancellor. I could lie to them all. What I needed was more time. "Don't tell them. Don't tell anyone."

"But, Your Highness, I—"

"We are at war, Master Akio," I said. "The Chiltaens have taken Tian and are laying siege to Koi. When they turn their gaze south, it will be to Shimai and Mei'lian, and neither can hold out against the full brunt of a combined Chiltaen and Levanti force. People will panic. How much more will they panic if they know the great Emperor General Kin Ts'ai is dead? And how much more confident will the Chiltaens be with no emperor to protect Kisia?" Panic churned inside me. "Please, Akio, you have to help me. They cannot know. No one can know."

"But, Your Highness, the body... everyone would know if they saw it."

"Then don't let them see it."

"Your Highness?"

I took a step closer. "These are the emperor's apartments, are they not? They have doors. They can be locked. They can be guarded. I could come

and go so as to appear I'm carrying out his orders. That would work, wouldn't it?"

He squirmed beneath my plea and looked away. "What about the servants? They would still bring meals and change his sheets and—"

"The meals can be left out in the main room. We can say he is sick and no one else is allowed to enter in case they get sick too."

Akio hesitated. "I suppose so," he said as though the words had been wrenched from his lips. "It would have to be a convincing disease, something not too serious but highly contagious. But then why are you allowed in?"

"I had it as a child. Or you can bring me his orders. Either way, we are the only ones allowed to see him."

He licked his lips with a nervous flick of his tongue. "And... his heir?"

"He doesn't have one. But for now, that isn't a problem because he isn't dead. This never happened. No one sees him. No one comes in here at all. Do you understand?"

He bowed his head. "Yes, Your Highness."

"It is the right thing to do." I touched his shoulder. Akio looked up as though I had pricked his skin, and I let my hand fall. "I promise. Now you do everything that needs doing here. I will speak to the guards."

And with one last look at the still form of Emperor Kin, I turned away and stepped into a changed world.

## Chapter 17

### Cassandra

The sun sank behind Koi, setting the walls aflame. We watched them fade from gold to red to a dim afterglow, watched darkness fold over them, watched the stars wink down between patches of cloud, and though the night wore on, we waited. Waited for silence. For peace. For that hour of night when even a great city like Koi teetered on the edge of sleep.

I had waited so for many men—Koi was just another kill. Best to think of it like that. Best not to think at all.

*Always been your forte.*

I ignored the jab and went on staring at the closed gates made tiny by distance. “You remember the plan?”

*Of course I remember the plan. I can read your thoughts and you haven’t stopped fretting about it all day.*

“It seems insane.”

*It is insane.*

I grimaced and lapsed into silence, a silence made all the deeper by Hers. The moment had come. With night wrapped around me, dark and still and far too cold, I made toward the road, refusing to pause, unwilling to dwell.

*Just keep moving,* She said, Her words unusually comforting. *We can do this.*

“I know we can,” I muttered as we met the road, its dark stones striped

with moonlight. "I'm just not sure we should."

Despite my uncertainty, I forced my legs to move us forward, one step after another. Not quietly though, we didn't need to be quiet. We needed the Kisians to see us coming. More whore tonight than assassin, despite the intended outcome.

Time to put on a show.

I broke into a run. Every other sound disappeared beneath the pounding of my boots and the whip of air past my ears. Ahead, the gatehouse grew from a distant speck to a looming figure, no longer a stern matron but a soldier preparing to strike.

I lifted my hands in surrender. "Hold your fire!" I shouted, hoping the unseen archers atop the walls would hear me. "Hold! I must see the empress!"

The gates remained closed and I slowed before them, arms still raised.

"Halt!" came a shout from above. "State your business."

I sucked breaths, not needing to feign a gasp for air. Genova was a city of short sprints, not long country runs. "My name is Cassandra Marius," I said. "Her Majesty knows me. I have important information and I must see her. Open the gate."

The great gates remained closed, torchlight reflecting from what might once have been a school of pike swimming through their lacquer.

"These gates don't open for anyone tonight. Walk away or get an arrow in the face."

"Your empress sent me on a mission," I said, falling to my knees in a show of fright that, like the breathlessness, wasn't entirely feigned. "I have returned in good faith."

"A spy would say so," shouted another voice. "But go ahead and stay there. My men could do with the target practice."

"The Chiltaen army is massed beyond the ridge," I said, still kneeling in the road, my hands clasped to plead. "But why are they there and not here? Hanging back is no way to lay siege to a city. I have information, but I will not shout it up to men preparing to kill me."

Though I heard nothing, I could imagine the whispered arguments and the strum of fingers on bowstrings. My fate hung in the hands of many. Whatever orders were given, it would take only one man to loose his arrow and all would be over.

Better for them if they did.

*I am not ready to die. You've never even let me live.*

"You're armed," a shout came from above, a new voice slicing the darkness. "Drop your weapons."

I stood and yanked my main dagger free, letting it fall with a heavy clang upon the stones. Then I made a great show of hoisting the skirt of the robe Empress Hana had given me and tugged my thigh dagger out of its sheath. It followed its sister, and I spread my arms and turned, a show for the watching eyes. Some laughter sounded above, no doubt in response to someone suggesting I take off all my clothes. I'd have done so gladly, distracted them with the glory of the female form, moonlit and naked before the closed gates, but whoever was in command atop the walls wisely gave no such order. Better to keep his men alert. Hopefully not so alert they thought to check my boots.

*Stupid to leave it to chance, She said.*

*What other way was there? Besides, it is far from the stupidest part of the plan.*

A warm sense of agreement bloomed, a strange, content feeling at odds with the situation—awaiting imminent death with my arms outstretched before an enemy city, a single blade jammed in my boot all that stood between a clean kill and a messy one.

"Open the gate," a voice shouted from on high. "Keep your hands up. If she moves them, she's dead." A warning for my benefit. He would have given the real orders in a hushed whisper and sent someone running to the castle. Empress Hana would surely be asleep, but it would not take long for someone to get there and rouse her. The clock was ticking.

The gates creaked their warning to the night, just one opening and barely wide enough for me to squeeze through. So squeeze I did, watched not only from above but from out in the darkness where half the Chiltaen army waited beyond the torchlight.

As the gate closed behind me, footsteps swarmed. Hands gripped my arms, forcing my head down, and they harried me in through a low door with hissed warnings and threats. I fought the urge to stab each and every one with the knife I wasn't meant to have, instead letting them shunt me on amid jostling leather shoulders stinking of sweat.

Another doorway. Then hands forced me down, and I gritted my teeth as

my kneecaps met stone. Golden light filled the small room deep inside the gatehouse, glinting off fastenings and sword hilts and the sinuous flow of a silk surcoat. Men crowded in. Muttered. Legs moved around me in a dance and I watched, perfectly still, as the music of dread spun them on like puppets in a play.

“If she’s the one Her Majesty let out, then we should just—”

“She’s an assassin. Do you want to be responsible for Her Majesty’s death? No? We wait.”

“It’s the middle of the night. We could be waiting a long time.”

“Then we wait a long time.”

The murmuring and restless shifting of weight continued, but I kept my eyes down, counting feet rather than faces, sounds rather than sights. Some men behind, more in front. Too many.

“She said she had information,” hissed the same voice from before. “Why isn’t she talking?”

“Why don’t you ask *her* that, boy?”

Some sniggering. More restless movement. Then feet appeared before me, resolute in their step. “You said you have information,” the voice said, definitely a young man. “Tell it.”

“I said I would not speak while arrows were trained upon me.”

No immediate denial. More shuffling. These were nervous men. It had been a long time since the Chiltaens had laid siege to Koi. The city had never fallen, but neither had their prince ever been executed without trial nor their emperor forced to flee as a traitor. Nothing was quite right anymore.

“Lower the arrows,” spoke the other voice, perhaps their commander. “We’ve got her safe here. Go back to the walls.”

Arrows clacked as they slid back into quivers, then footsteps scuffed the stone and fewer men remained. The young man hadn’t moved, his feet still firmly planted in my field of vision. “Well?” he said. “No arrows.”

“No brains,” I returned. “If I tell you now, you’ll kill me and throw me off the wall. I’ll see Her Majesty first.”

A low growl, quickly cut off, and the restless movement returned. There were still too many men in the room, but the longer we waited the more chance someone would come to whisk us up to the castle under guard, and whatever happened from there would be messy.

I looked up. The guard scowling at me was as young as I had guessed and stupid enough to have his arms folded in front of him. The man in charge stood by the door and was not so stupid. His hands were as close to the hilt of his sword and dagger as you could get without actually holding them. Another two men stood on the opposite side of the room, and a fifth behind me. The single door sat ajar, a flicker of light shining through the gap.

“You can’t blame me for wanting to protect myself,” I said, trying for non-threatening.

*Ha!*

“I hardly see how keeping silent is protecting yourself,” the commander said from the doorway. “If your countrymen attack this city, you’ll be stuck inside with us.”

“Proof I am not your enemy. I risk a lot to be here.”

The young man snorted, but he looked away with reddening cheeks as I stuck my gaze to his face. I had made a few alterations to the robe Her Majesty had given me. The commander might be jaded enough not to care how I looked, but breasts had a way of distracting most men that was always useful.

“A Chiltaen assassin is always an enemy,” spoke the man behind me. “No matter what you risk for your own ends.”

“For my own ends?” I turned, using the gifted opportunity to scout the rest of the room. “Her Majesty trusted me with a task too important for any of you; is that not worth anything? Do you believe in your empress so little?”

I let anger flare in the words and was pleased with the resulting grumbles. I had been right in my first count. Five men and me.

*And me. I can do this.*

“Who are you to talk of believing in the Dragon Empress, Chiltaen whore?” The guard’s hand tightened upon the hilt of his dagger. Smart man there, for the room was far too cramped for a long blade, something the young man in front of me would probably fail to take into account.

“Not yet, Lin,” the commander said. “For now, we wait.”

With a grunt, the man eased back, and I damned the commander for being so level-headed. I needed panic.

“You want to know why I’m here,” I said, turning my gaze from one



man to the next. “You want to know why I need to see Her Majesty? Because you’re all about to die. The Chiltaens have men inside the city. Inside your ranks.” I looked at Lin, leaning now against the wall—his the only name I had gleaned. “Isn’t that right, Lin?”

Even the commander’s head turned as exclamations rent the air. It was the best I was going to get, and yanking my dagger free, I stuck it into the young man’s leg, slicing up the inside of his thigh where the armour was thin. He yelped. Blood gushed free and I could have killed him, but only a handful of heartbeats remained before the rest recovered from the shock.

I lunged at the commander, but he blocked my slash on a raised arm and thrust his dagger toward my gut. An awkward sidestep barely saved me, and ducking beneath his hurried guard, I plunged my blade into his exposed underarm. In the space of his pained hiss, I caught his blade as he dropped it, and jammed it into the side of his neck. Shock widened his eyes, and almost I wished the work undone. No monster this, just a man trying to protect his people, trying to do his job. There hadn’t even been a sneer of superiority on his face.

The man fell gurgling. Pushing away the regret, I turned, already lunging so the commander’s dagger could meet Lin’s oncoming face. It sunk into his eye and he dropped like a stone.

*Let me out! I can do this. I can.*

I dropped beneath a blind thrust and caught one of the remaining two guards a jab in the crotch. He joined the young man howling on the stones as the fifth and final man edged toward the door. There a pause for breath, a single moment of peace within a battle, and without dragging my gaze from my assailants, I gripped the commander’s dead hand. The call of death ceased as She bled out through my skin.

The commander groaned.

“Being dead feels worse than being fucked by fat merchants,” he said. The young guard bleeding out upon the floor grew whiter. His mouth twisted in horror. With a scrape of buckles and boots, the commander’s body rose to its feet.

“You’re all staring at me,” he said, the note of amusement hard to ignore. “Haven’t you seen a dead man walking before?”

She walked the body forward, and when its silk surcoat brushed my arm, I shivered. The man had been dead and now he walked again. Talked even,

his voice exactly the same. Wearing another's skin, She moved toward the centre of the room. No weapon. Just confident swagger. She was as bad as the young guard, all big ideas and no experience.

“Get down, you idiot!” I said. “You're not even armed.”

Using the commander's hand, She drew his sword, the sort of thing the real man would never have been stupid enough to do. However ill held, the threat of a blade spurred the remaining guards to movement. One of them made for the door in a panic only to trip over my foot and tumble headfirst into a welcoming blade. The other launched himself at his former commander and buried his dagger up to the hilt in the dead man's gut. She grunted, more from annoyance than anything, and pushed him away, the awkward move managing to slice the man's groin.

As his comrade landed on the stones beside him, the youngest soldier shouted for help. I plunged my blade into his throat, ending his shout with a gurgle of air and blood.

“What are you?” the last guard said, gripping his gushing wound. “I saw you die.”

She pulled the dagger from Her own gut as running footsteps came along the passage. Two, maybe three men. I growled. “Kill this one. I'll get these.”

“We don't have to. I'm their commander, let me just talk to them.”

No time to argue. She strode out wearing Her commander-skin and the footsteps halted in the passage. Alone in the sudden silence of the room, the dying guard and I took simultaneous breaths and let them go. “What is he?” he repeated. “What are you?”

“Monsters,” I said, hefting a dagger that seemed suddenly heavy in my hand. “I'm sorry.”

I slit his throat and he collapsed onto the stones as a guard walked in, followed by a second. They both halted on the threshold, taking the scene in at a soldier's speed.

“What the—?”

I lunged at the first and almost took a knife to the face. Shock had only held them a fraction of a second before they sped into the room, forcing me to duck. The tip of the blade skimmed my hair, and while the man's arm was outstretched, I shouldered him in the chest. He fell back against the guard behind him and I buried my knife in his side. The second guard did

not lose his balance and came at me.

*Shit shit shit.* I gripped his dying comrade's tunic and hauled him between us. A blade glanced off his armour and I threw the dying man into the living one. This time he fell against the wall, smacking his head on the stone, and I thrust my knife into his throat. With a wet gasp, his corpse slid down to join the others in a mess of blood and flesh upon the floor.

"You said you were going to talk to them!" A sob welled up from the depths of my soul. "That last one nearly got me. Was that the plan? Get me killed so we both have dead bodies?"

"No, you were meant to be ready to get them as they came in."

"Oh yes? Where was that in the plan?"

"I told you when I went out."

I glared as realisation dawned in the dead eyes before me. "Fuck," She said. "You can't hear me if I don't speak out loud when I'm out here."

"Yeah, I thought that was kind of obvious."

"I'm not used to this, all right?"

"Just like you're not used to using a weapon. Swords are for big open areas, not confined little rooms. If you don't know what you're doing, then you're always better off keeping to fists and dirty tricks." It was almost word for word what Allovian had said the day he found me brandishing a dinner knife at one of the hospice kids.

I looked around at the dead bodies. "We need to get out of here before more come. We can pretend like you're marching me out. Just... wrap something around your neck. We have to move."

"Like what?"

I cut the knot on the young man's sash and yanked it from his body, annoyed by Her incompetence as I looped it around the oozing wound in the commander's neck. Her neck. She stared at me while I worked, Her gaze making my skin itch and crawl. *Monster* I had called myself. Had called Her.

"Is this what it feels like to have a sister who braids my hair?" She said as I jerked the ends of the knot tight. It wasn't perfect, but as long as she kept in poor light, we might get out. After all, who would suspect? Dead men don't usually get back up and talk about having their hair braided.

"Better," I said. "Now act like a commander and get moving. A messenger could come from the castle any moment, and if someone walks

in here..." I let a breath out in a rush of air. "Once I get away, lie low and wait. Give me an hour, then get that gate open. I'll do the rest."

"Unless you get caught."

"Unless I get caught. Then you'll have to get both gates. At least walking around as a commander should help there."

A beat of silence, filled with unspoken words. Then: "Don't die."

"I'll do my best," I said. "It's been good enough so far."

We left, closing the door on the massacre as though it were a tomb. Out in the narrow stone passage, She gripped my wrists with Her dead hands and we made our way toward the light. Two guards stood near the entryway.

"What's going on?" one said, eyeing us both.

"Taking this one up to the castle," She said with the commander's voice if not quite his tone.

"But Kovako hasn't returned."

*Damn damn damn I didn't think of that*, I hissed in the silence of my head, but She levelled a hard stare at them both, then pointed to the sash tied around Her neck. "She needs a cell. I'm taking her to the castle."

One of them sniggered, and She yanked me on with a growl and some muttered insults. Only when we emerged from the stone labyrinth did I realise the scent of blood was all over me.

"Those men are going to go look in that room," I whispered as we drew out of earshot, our feet hitting the stones of the square like synchronised hammers.

"They probably already are," She returned in Her manly voice.

"Commander!" someone shouted after us. "You should wait for the palanquin."

"What do we do?" She said.

"Just keep walking."

"Commander!"

Footsteps followed.

"All right, new plan," I said. "I'll break away and run and see if I can get into the castle another way."

"What?" She hissed.

"Who knows, it might work. Otherwise it's all on you. Don't worry, I'm pretty sure no one can kill a dead body."

I shoved Her away hard and sped to a run. Shouts chased after me, but I dared not look back, too busy hunting a narrow side alley in which I could get lost. Any alley would do, but the main road seemed to funnel me up the hill, caught in a tunnel of close-ranked buildings and stone retaining walls. More shouts broke behind me, and I wove through shocked citizens, shoving them in my haste. My legs ached but I ran on. Even when a stabbing pain in my gut reminded me I hadn't eaten a proper meal in a long time, I ran.

Until someone slammed into me. We hit the ground in a tangle of arms and legs, and I might have rolled to my feet and kept going had a blade not nicked my throat. Jerking back made my head smack stone. Light flashed before my eyes.

"I've got her!"

Voices sounded everywhere and soon became men panting heavily from the exercise. "Stupid bitch," another said, yanking the dagger from my stunned hand. "Think you can outrun us in our own city."

Irons clamped around my wrists, the weight pinning me to the road more surely than the blade at my throat. "Wait!" I said, sense returning. "You have to let me go. The Chiltaens—"

A fist met my face, and for the second time my head hit the stones, pain blotching my senses from the back and the front at the same time.

"Shut up. You're going to the empress and if she doesn't like what you have to say, you die. No more talking."

"Palanquin's here," spoke another. "Get her up."

They yanked me to my feet, my vision blurry as I hunted the gathered crowd for Her. I dared not ask what had happened to the commander.

For the second time, a gathering of hands bundled me into a palanquin, and though my wrists were bound, they completed my prison by stretching the fabric to its hooks. Barely a moment to catch my breath and we were moving—fast—a storm of footsteps running alongside. I closed my eyes, trying not to think about my cramped, silken cell as it swayed sickeningly on.

My hope that we might stop just inside the castle's outer gate was swiftly dashed. The palanquin slowed to pass through it, but once inside, the carriers sped on, their breaths becoming ragged as we wound our way up through the defensive maze. I slumped back on the cushions. She would

have to see to the gate without my help.

At a run, the defences were soon behind us, and when the palanquin slowed, a stink eked in through the taut curtains. The traitors' heads had not been removed.

Before the palanquin could be set down, someone loosened a side, and I tumbled onto the stones, gasping for air. "Get up," one of the guards said, prodding me with the butt of his spear. "Her Majesty is waiting."

"I... I can't, I..."

A man gripped my chained arms and yanked me up. I could have taken my weight, but I let my legs buckle, forcing him to drop his spear to hold me. Swearing, he hauled me up. "Someone help me! We need to get this bitch inside, she's having a fit or something."

"Happened last time too," another grumbled. "Although she got over it pretty fast."

I went full dramatic whore on them, arching back and writhing. "I can't breathe! I can't breathe! Please, help me, please—"

Someone shouted for help. I swung my manacled hands at the next face that came near me, but although a man swore, the grip on me didn't loosen. So, just when they seemed confused enough, I fainted. Mama Hera would have been proud. Lots of women make good whores, she had always said, but few were bloodthirsty enough to kill, and fewer still good enough actresses to make it an art.

I forced myself to relax, to be like a dead lump of flesh upon the stones. They prodded me. One nudged me with a toe. "Is she dead?"

"Does she look dead to you, Kai?"

"No, Captain, but—"

"Then she's not dead. Damn waste of time. Someone run for Master Kenji. The rest of you carry the bitch inside."

I flopped when they tried to lift me, forcing them to drag me instead. My heels bumped and scraped over the stones, but I let my head loll and went on playing dead. Thankfully, one grabbed my heels at the stairs and they carried me the rest of the way into Koi Castle, its sounds and smells close and blanketed in fear.

"What is going on?" spoke a distant voice.

"She fainted, my lord," replied the guard at my feet. "At least I think so. She looked possessed."

I didn't catch the mumbled reply, but it seemed a good time to ensure they would not take me before their empress, so with the extra audience, I opened my eyes and stiffened every muscle. With shocked cries they dropped me onto the stones, and turning my pained gasp to a wail, I once more started to writhe, rolling my eyes back and blubbering about being unable to breathe. Then I slumped into another faint.

"We can't take her in like this."

"It could be a demon."

"You can carry this end then."

"I told you we always get the bad jobs. They don't like southerners up here."

They cleared their throats and dropped into silence, but what had caused it I dared not open my eyes to see. "Her Majesty will see her now," spoke a new voice.

"But—"

"Now, Captain Adara."

"You heard the general. Get her up."

Had there been a dagger handy, I might have made a messy break for freedom, but I had no weapon, my hands were bound, and all my acting had achieved nothing.

Last time I had been taken straight to the throne room, but I knew by the echo they were not carrying me through its grand doors. When I heard the thud of boots on stairs, I knew I was in trouble. They were taking me somewhere deep inside the castle where I would be too lost to escape.

I tried a second time to writhe from their grips, catching a glimpse of heavy wooden beams and a screen door as I rolled my eyes and moaned. They struggled but carried me on.

Eventually they stopped. Feet shuffled. A screen door slid. More steps. Low, whispering voices and reeds crackled under my weight as they lowered me to the floor. Flickering light played upon my eyelids and every breath was filled with a fug of incense.

A hand touched my forehead and I flinched, not having expected tenderness. I opened my eyes. A life-worn man with a slight frown looked down at me. "Not possessed," he said. "And it seems she can breathe just fine."

"Don't look so surprised, Captain," came the voice of the Dragon

Empress nearby. “It cannot be the first time a woman has tricked you. Go, wait outside.”

Almost I wished they would stay, preferring the safety of the threat I knew over the one I feared, but throwing glares my way, Captain Adara and his men departed. The old man retreated from my vision too, leaving me to face Empress Hana alone. She sat upon no throne, but somehow the bank of cushions propping her up was all the more frightening. She scowled at me, fatigue sagging her features and pain hardening her jaw, while kneeling at her side, the warm bronze of the Kisian physician’s leathery skin made a mockery of her pale face and hair.

She looked more Chiltaen than I did.

“Miss Marius,” the empress said, forcing strength to her voice despite blood trickling from a forest of needles in her arm. “You have returned rather sooner than I expected. Is it done?”

I could find no voice to lie, just stared at the needles. Empress Hana followed my gaze. “You cannot tell me the sight of blood makes you squeamish, Miss Marius.”

The sight of the Dragon Empress so small and broken twisted something inside me until it ached. Aunt Elora had looked the same after they beat her, but no matter how often she had been hit or taunted or spat on, she had stood proudly upright, refusing everyone the satisfaction of seeing her pain.

“Ah,” the empress said when still I did not answer. “Do you wish to manipulate me into expounding upon the nature of my illness so you can take the information to your masters? You are clever, Miss Marius, but I have honed my mind with years of walking the line of treason at an ever-watchful court. Is he dead? Is my city safe?”

The physician at her side paused a moment, a sign of discomfort she ignored.

“No,” I said, finding my voice. “I could not get close enough to kill him.” I had lied to Aunt Elora too and it had hurt as much—an old memory that ought to have lost all power over me. “But I found out that the Chiltaens don’t plan to lay siege to Koi. They don’t need to. They have infiltrated the city and mean to have the gates opened from the inside.”

“By who?”

“I don’t know, but... Leo might.” I improvised rapidly. “His father marches with the army, but Leo wants this war as little as you do. I don’t



think he will trust you, but he might talk to me.”

“The deal was for a dead hieromonk, Miss Marius. If you want your servant’s head, then—”

“I don’t give a damn about his head anymore,” I snapped, the truth surprising even me. The whole job had gone to the hells and Jonus’s death meant nothing anymore. I might still get the Witchdoctor if I was lucky, but getting out of here alive was already going to be a stretch.

Empress Hana tilted her head to the side. “Don’t tell me you came to warn us out of the goodness of your heart, Miss Marius.”

I pulled a face. “You make it sound so gross.”

She laughed, setting the needles in her arm trembling. The old physician clicked his tongue. “I am not as foolish as you seem to think me, Miss Marius,” the empress said. “There is something you aren’t telling me—no, don’t try to deny it. You have something of great importance to communicate to him, perhaps, or the hieromonk wishes his son dead so he won’t look bad refusing his ransom.” She looked over my head to the door. “Take Miss Marius to see Dom Villius, Captain, but keep her chained and don’t leave her alone. Let’s see what the clever hieromonk is up to.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“And once she’s done, Captain, find her a nice cell.”

“What?” I said.

“You reneged on our bargain, Miss Marius. We are done.”

“Wait! No, listen—”

With a hand under each arm, two guards lifted me to my feet. Captain Adara smacked me on the back of the head and I bowed, rising to find the empress’s face a mask of fury. “Goodbye, Miss Marius.”

The hush of the screens closing behind me was as final as the slamming of any door.

*Well, this is about as fucked up as a plan can get,* I said. She did not answer. She was somewhere out in the city, our last chance of opening the gates for the Chiltaen army as promised. If she failed, there would be no Witchdoctor, I would rot in prison at Empress Hana’s mercy, and She would just rot, stuck in her commander-skin.

Caught in a swirl of panicked thoughts, it was no time at all before the captain was nodding to the guard outside Leo’s door. “We’re here to see the boy. Her Majesty’s orders.”

“You’d better go in then, though he’s not much of a talker.”

The door slid, and there in the middle of the floor sat Leo, seemingly deep in prayer.

“Hello again, Cassandra.” The words dropped dully from his lips. “You wish to ask me something.”

I must have made a strangled sound for he looked up.

“About the infiltrators,” he said as though trying to jog my memory. “I should have known you would find out.”

With his hands still clasped, he nodded at Captain Adara. “If you and your guards wait outside, I will talk.”

The captain narrowed his eyes at the young man. “Not a chance. I am not leaving this one alone anywhere. Say what you have to say, then the assassin is going to the cells where she belongs.”

Leo looked from the captain to the rest of the guards who had accompanied me, all clumped in the open doorway. “Just you then,” he said. “I trust the honour of a man of your rank.”

Captain Adara grunted. “Fine, but that means *Captain Iko* stays too.” He pointed triumphantly at the guard that had been standing outside Leo’s door. “And you’ve got ten minutes.”

He ordered the others to wait out in the passage, and while they filed out and slid the door closed, he tightened his hold on my arm until his fingernails cut into my skin. On his other side, Leo’s guard stood impassive, his lips pressed to a grim line as he stared at nothing.

A slow, silent minute passed while Leo went on praying. Captain Adara shuffled restlessly, huffing, and when the God’s child still made no move, he stepped forward. “If you’ve got nothing to say, then I—”

The rest of his words escaped in an ooze of blood as Captain Iko slashed his throat. One last gasp was all the man had left before he crumpled, to be caught and gently lowered to the floor by the man who had ended his life.

“He has... made a few bad choices he doesn’t wish General Ryoji to know about,” Leo said, rising from the floor as Captain Iko took a key from his belt and unlocked the manacles weighing down my hands. “So much so that he is willing to help me.”

“Help you do what?”

“Die.” He held out a dagger. “By the right hands.”

I stared at him and he stared at me, the distance between us a body

length, yet it seemed like miles. The effort to make my feet move, to force even a single step, stuck me in place.

“Don’t tell me Cassandra Marius has gone soft,” he said.

The deep tone of a gong cut through the castle. It rang not once but over and over again, more gongs joining its panicked rhythm. Outside, shouts swelled. “What’s going on?” A shadow shifted outside the screen door like a character in a shadow play.

“The main gate is open!” came a reply. “The outer wall has been breached!”

“Shit! Someone tell Her Majesty. You, stay here and make sure he doesn’t get out.”

Running steps faded away into the growing chaos.

“It looks like you did a good job,” Leo said, drawing my attention back from the door. “Or part of you did. Now you need to do the rest.”

“Why does your father want you dead?”

A shrug twitched his shoulders. “Why does any father want to kill their son? Because they’re a threat. He has plans. I have plans. They aren’t the same plans. Do you always talk to your targets? Those guards will return soon; you should get on with the job you came to do.”

It was exactly the job I had come to do. And yet... I glanced at Iko, immobile by the door, and back to the serious young face before me. “Why do you want to die?”

“Because it is what happens. What must happen.”

“Then why not just ask Captain Iko to do it if he is so willing to help you?”

He tilted his head, curiously. “Are you so unwilling? Do I need to make you angry?”

“No. Were there really other infiltrators?”

Leo laughed. “Of course not. Open your eyes. I’m not as simple as you think I am. Your friend out there isn’t as simple and useless as you think she is, either, as she has just demonstrated. Come on, Cassandra, kill me before it’s too late for us both.”

The noise of battle rose outside the windows. She had done the job, She had opened the gates, and here was I balking at killing one man as though I had never slit a throat before.

“Is it really so difficult?”

I hadn't thought so, but now I was here I could not bring myself to move.

"I know we don't have time for this," he snapped over his shoulder as though speaking to the window. "Please, Cassandra. Would it help if I forgive you now for what you are about to do? It is the right thing. In the name of the One True God, I beg you to take my life."

*Do it.*

It sounded like Her, but She was out there in the commander's body...

*Stop thinking. Just come closer.*

The voice reached down inside me, and I nodded dumbly and took a step. Leo smiled as I approached, smiled despite the dagger heavy in my hand, despite the skill with which he had seen me use it and the death he knew was coming.

Beneath the single hanging lantern he looked like a golden idol, his fair hair a crown and his Kisian robes regal. The sleepy smile did not fade, perhaps even deepened as he held something out for me to take. A linen bag, the sort used by laundry maids in noble households when collecting dirty unmentionables.

"I don't want to do this," I said.

"Yes, you do. Goodbye, Cassandra."

I took the bag. "Goodbye, Leo."

He didn't budge as I hefted the dagger.

*Come on!* The voice came again. *Heart. Quick. Simple. Done.*

A fine sentiment, but hearts weren't easy, protected by a whole cluster of ribs and—

*Of course you have to be difficult. I won't move. You can do this. Must do this. Kill me now.*

He didn't move when I felt his ribs like a physician. Didn't move when I brought the tip of the blade in. Didn't move when it punched into his chest between bones. Blood blossomed out from the blade, and Leo smiled at me even as I pulled the dagger free. He crumpled, no longer a god but a fading, broken corpse like any other, and as his life bled out, so too did the fog from my mind.

"Shit," I said to the rapid tattoo of my heart. I had done it. I had killed him. The hope for peace, dead at my feet, his life blood pouring onto the matting. "No no no, that wasn't meant to happen." But it had been my plan.

Of course it had been my plan. My head spun. My hands shook. “Pull yourself together. That fucker wants his head.” Battle sounds filled the castle, shouts and thudding arrows, broken-off screams and clangs of steel. But I had a job to finish, and I knelt to pierce the warm flesh of Leo’s throat.

“Move. I’ll do it.”

I had forgotten about Captain Iko and jumped as the guard appeared beside me, his sword drawn. I shuffled back and he brought the blade down upon Leo’s neck. Blood spurted onto the reed floor, but a few more messy hacks and the job was done.

Gripping a handful of golden hair, I shoved the head into the linen bag.

The door opened.

“I think,” said an all too familiar voice, “that belongs to me.”

Leo stood in the doorway, his smile the same one Iko had just cut from his body. Even his outstretched hand looked the same as the one that had held out the bag mere moments before and now lay lifeless upon the floor.

“My head, Cassandra.”

“How...?”

“God has a purpose for us all.” He stepped closer and took the bag from my slack grip. The scent of his clean hair wafted past my face. “Thank you. And to you, Iko. The promised gift for your service.” Leo handed the man a rolled up robe and a mask, the simple attire of a high cleric. “It ought to get you out of the city if you are careful.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

Leo turned his sweet, innocent smile on me. “Thank you, Cassandra. And I’m sorry this is how it had to end. I hope my dear Papa will not be too hard on you. You were... quite good company.”

And as suddenly as he had appeared, he was gone. I stared at the closed door. Stared at it while Iko changed his clothes, stared as he opened it and closed it again behind him, stared while the sounds of battle rose and fell away, because to move would be to admit it had been anything more than a dream.

## Chapter 18

### Rah

Hair fell to the ground, first in long clumps that twisted with a life of their own, then in shorter and shorter tufts until the wind carried it away. Sett shaved the rest. And while he worked, we chanted, intoning the initiation song over and over to commemorate a life given in service to the herd.

It was a fifteen-cycle tenure, after which one could continue to serve as Gideon had or be released back into the herd to work and have children, but either way, we carried our brandings forever. The iron sat in the brazier, its ambient heat rivalling the soaring sun.

Although only the Torin ought to have gathered for Juta's Making, many others had joined us. Other Levanti I could accept, but the curious Chiltaen onlookers had no right to be present.

I ground my teeth when one pointed and called out to a comrade just as Sett finished shaving Juta's head. Gideon seemed not to notice and stepped confidently into the circle.

"As herd master of the Levanti herd, I, Gideon e'Torin, beseech the blessing of Nassus on behalf of Juta e'Torin as he gives himself in protection of the herd. May the god of death smile upon our brother. May he have mercy upon his body and receive his soul with honour upon its return. We mark him now as one of our own that he may always be known for his sacrifice."

Juta ran a hand over his hairless scalp, returning over and over again to

explore previously unknown ridges and divots. I had stared at the branding iron during my own Making, unable to draw my gaze from its glowing rod. Ten years later, I still could not look at one without shuddering.

“I guess we had better do this thing,” Yitti said, getting to his feet with a grunt of effort and a click of worn knees.

I nodded, swallowing to quiet the snake swirling in my stomach. “You have everything you need?”

“All ready. I’m just glad it’s not me holding that iron.”

“Me too.” I returned his faint smile. “There aren’t many less enviable tasks a captain has to perform.”

“Except returning the souls of his dead Swords.”

I left a beat of silence then bowed my head. “Yes, except that. Nothing ever makes that easier.” I had Farewelled one more upon our return from Tian, but Amun and the others were forever beyond my reach. I had not found a way to tell Yitti the truth and held it with me as I got to my feet, every muscle aching.

Gideon approached the brazier and pulled on his leather glove. “You know how this works,” he said, his voice low as he gripped the iron and stirred the coals. “Nothing can go wrong. Too many people are watching. This is the first Making most of these Chiltaens have seen, which means we are representing every Levanti living or dead.”

“Then we ought not to give a damn what they think of us,” I said. “They should not even be watching.”

“You should have more pride in your people, Rah. Your boy fought well. Honour him whatever you might think of me.”

My cheeks grew hot like the coals, but Juta was waiting in the centre of the circle, his head bowed. There was no time to say more.

“You ready, boy?” Yitti said, dropping a hand to Juta’s shoulder.

“I’m ready, healer,” he said. “Is Captain—?” His gaze found me, and he smiled in apology, though whether for forcing my hand or for fighting when I did not, I couldn’t be sure. That he had wanted to fight so badly had saved his life, a truth I could no more tell him than I could tell Yitti.

“Bend your head and don’t move,” I said as the Torin once more began to chant around us. “I’ll hold you as best I can, but if you fight me, this is going hurt way more than it needs to.”

“Yes, Captain. Thank you.”

“No,” I said, putting my hands on the sticky skin of his newly shaved head. “Thank you.”

He jerked as though he would have looked up, but the combined weight of Yitti and I kept him from moving. At least for now. Pain could grant a body strength it did not usually own.

I focussed on Juta’s red-raw skin, as around us the chanting sped, growing louder and faster with every repetition. Gideon removed the branding iron with a scrape of metal on metal, and Juta started taking deep, long breaths to carry away the oncoming pain. I had tried something like it myself, but it hadn’t worked. It had been all I could do not to scream, sure the iron would melt through my skull and into my brain.

Gideon pressed the hot iron to the back of Juta’s head. Skin sizzled. The boy jolted against my hands, but I held him tight. A grunt of pain. Sharp breaths in through his nose. And standing firm behind him, Gideon counted. Removed too soon, it would only blister and weep, too long and it would do more than scar.

The chanting became feverish. The stink of burning skin made me want to retch, but I clamped my lips and kept my hands on Juta’s head until Gideon pulled the iron away. I had hardly noticed the heat so close until it was gone, replaced with the comparative cool of a Kisian summer.

Yitti snatched up a gourd and poured its contents over the seared skin. Juta roared and reared up, throwing me off balance. A few hurried steps saved me from falling upon my arse, but it was close.

Juta’s chest heaved as he sucked breaths, every inch of his skin reddened and glistening with sweat. Without his hair, he looked different, a man now, baring his teeth as the stinging slowly subsided to a throb. That would last awhile—at least it had for me, kneeling beneath the dry Levanti sun with only the newly gelded Jinso for company. Hard not to be friends after an experience like that.

Normally, drumming accompanied the chanting, but the Torin had made do with sticks and clapping, and it rose now to a crescendo that lacked all rhythm, the thunder ceasing abruptly when Juta got to his feet. “To the Torin I give my life,” he cried, throwing his arms wide. “To the Torin I give my soul. I am the Sword that hunts so your hands may be clean. I am the Sword that kills so your soul may be light. I am the Sword that dies so you may live!”



Cheers joined the thunder, and in the midst of the noise I soared, reminded of all we had been. All we could be. Yet Chiltaens stood watching, some cheering, others with curling lips, our customs merely a curiosity to them. They knew nothing of life on the plains, nothing of our culture or our language, nothing of what Juta had chosen to sacrifice.

Gideon saluted Juta and the boy returned the gesture. I did the same and Yitti followed, the last of my Hand, for although Kishava's soul had been freed, there had been little time to replace her. At least with so many other Swords present Juta would not lack for respect. And once that respect had been paid, he would kneel beneath the afternoon sun until the Watchful Father rose to relieve him of his vigil.

With his job complete, Gideon departed the disintegrating circle, Sett at his heels. At the edge of the crowd, they passed the saddleboy who had been the first Levanti we'd met on these shores, and walked on without so much as a nod. The boy turned as though he might call after them, but he deflated as Levanti and Chiltaens alike buffeted past him.

I strode over, pity overcoming the dislike our first meeting had forged. He didn't see me approach, his gaze still following Gideon, and I had to clear my throat. Commander Brutus's translator gave a start and screwed up his face. "Captain Rah," he said, stepping hastily aside. "I'm sorry. I'm in your way."

"Not at all," I said, swallowing all the anger he had done nothing to deserve. "Perhaps *I* ought to apologise for interrupting your thoughts."

"I was... watching the Making."

A lie but I let it pass, able to guess that he had been thinking of asking Gideon exactly the same thing Juta had asked me.

"Even though you did the job Gideon bade you, you're still a saddleboy?"

A nod.

"Though by age you ought not to be."

Another nod.

I swallowed a lump of anger and clapped him on the shoulder. "Come. Walk with me. I could use the company. What's your name?"

"Tor e'Torin, Captain."

"A pleasure to properly meet you, Tor e'Torin," I said, pressing my fists together in a salute.

The young man returned the salute and fell into step beside me. Together we walked away from the collection of tents that had been marked out for our use, away from Juta and Gideon and everything else that might remind the boy of what he had lost.

Back within the circle I could almost have believed I was home, but away from it the camp was a different world. Everything felt wrong, smelt wrong, and sounded wrong. Unintelligible insults were thrown our way just for walking by, and while many soldiers and slaves went out of their way to avoid us, one man sneered as he slammed his shoulder into mine. Hateful laughter sounds the same in every language.

I sighed. "I guess you can understand all the awful things they are saying, can't you?"

"Yes, Captain. You're definitely better off not knowing."

"You wish you didn't?" I said, dodging around a man who deliberately veered my way. A shout rose from a Hoya game taking place near the horse pens, and drawn by the familiar, I steered us toward it.

"Yes and no," Tor said, pushing the long hair out of his face. "I'm still alive because I'm valuable to the Chiltaens; that is something to be thankful for. I have a nice tent and good food, and my mother always told me it was better to focus on the things we have than the things we don't."

"Like a herd."

He looked away and I wished the words unsaid. Whatever their truth, they had not been kind. I would have forgiven him for walking away then, for excusing himself and leaving me to walk alone, but after a few moments of silence, he said, "Yes, like a herd."

"Have you asked Gideon if you can return? If you can be Made?"

"Yes, but the Chiltaens will not let me go, or any of the others." He scowled at the muddy ground beneath our feet as we approached the horse pens. "Though in truth I think it's not just them. He won't take us back if there's still a chance the Chiltaens will hunt down more exiled warriors."

"More?"

Tor shrugged. "There's probably more by now, camping on that rocky coast. Only this morning Gideon tried to persuade Legate Andrus to send out more patrols to round them up."

I stopped. Around us, the happy cries of Levanti playing Hoya mixed with the snort and nicker of horses, but it all fell away beneath those ringing

words. Such a look of revulsion on the boy's face, his lip curled, though a perverse sort of joy spread his lips to a smile the longer I stared. "He didn't tell you that?" he said. "Didn't tell you that hunting out more Levanti to imprison here and force to fight was his idea in the first place?"

I could not answer, could not speak at all. I left Tor there beside the horse pens and ran back the way we had come, sped by anger more than thought, by a desperate need to have it all explained away.

"Gideon!" I called as I strode toward his tent—the same silk construction he'd used in the old camp on the other side of the border. The Chiltaen approach to war seemed to involve a continuous stream of carts linking them to their home like an umbilical cord, and rather than travel light with just their soldiers, they carried their whole camp with them, picking it up and putting it down every day like an aged turtle afraid of the sun.

"Gideon!"

The fabric flapped against my face as I pushed through it. Gideon was sitting at his table, a map unrolled before him and held flat by two heavy bowls of fruit. "Wait a moment, Rah," he said, lifting one hand to me and pointing to the map with the other. "This is the place. Syan." Across the table, Sett peered at where he indicated.

"And how many ships?" Sett said, keeping his voice low.

"Two dozen Lady Sichi said, but it could be more. Their language is strange when it comes to numbers and there was no time to be sure. Clever girl, though. I liked her."

"And how many men?"

"A third of the Kisian army."

Sett whistled. "I'll have a word with the boy."

"Good. And take this." Gideon held out the Torin branding iron to his second. "I doubt we'll need it again for a while."

In one smooth movement Sett took it, saluted, and departed, letting in a bolt of sunlight and a waft of horse shit before the tent flap fell back behind him. A fly buzzed around a stub of incense on a small side table.

Gideon went back to the map, running his hand over the crackling parchment as one might touch a lover. There were holes in it and one corner had been torn off, but his lips moved as his hand danced from town to town.

Having sucked my anger in, it seemed to have dammed inside my throat,

and even when he lowered his hand and gave me his attention, nothing came out. Gideon lifted his brows. “Well?”

“You sent them after us.”

His gaze flitted to the tent flap as though expecting to see Tor there, and I needed no greater admission of guilt.

“You knew other Swordherds were being exiled like you were, and rather than let them be, let them live out their cycles and go back, you sent Chiltaens to capture them. To capture us.” My voice caught on the words as I thought of Orun and Hamatet and Gam and all the others we had lost to Chiltaen cruelty.

Gideon sat back and folded his arms. “You make it sound as though I instigated it all, and I can guess who gave you that idea. But the Chiltaens were already picking up other exiled Swordherds the same as they had picked up us, I just supplied them with some saddleboys good at learning languages so they could communicate better.”

It was a reasonable answer, lacking emotion but for a light sneer, but it was not enough. I needed vehemence. Anger. Anything more assuring than the boredom he mocked me with. The saddleboy’s words had owned honest emotions, and in truth, I wanted to believe him because it was easier to blame someone else for the pain my Swords had suffered.

“Are we done?” When I made no answer, Gideon ran his hands over his face. “I have things to do. We move out again in the morning, though with half the Chiltaen force off sacking Koi, there will be more work to be done setting up the camp from now on.”

His words came to me through the haze of a frightening idea. It slid into every corner of my mind on a trickle of icy panic laced with a thrill I tried to ignore.

“Rah?”

I met the gaze of a man who had known his own people would die if they refused to fight and had said nothing, a man who had refused to let us free the souls of the dead, a man who was weighing our souls heavy with needless cruelties... a man who had always been father and brother and mentor, who I had loved and admired more than any other.

The words were there but I could not speak them. Fear stayed my tongue, because they were words I could never take back, and if I challenged him, it wouldn’t matter the outcome because either way I would

lose. My position or him.

“I must go check on Juta,” I said and escaped back into the camp before the challenge could pass my lips.



Juta knelt for the rest of the day without food or water. As evening drew close, he became the centre of an increasingly large swarm of insects, but still he did not move.

“He’s good,” Yitti said, joining me as I watched the boy. “Those flies would make me scream.”

“Even worse than having to sit in the rain,” I agreed. “Do you remember Kishava had to do that?”

As so often happened with our conversations, a beat of silence fell before he answered. “Yes, I remember. Memat says she had to sit through lightning.”

“Oh yes? What else does Memat say?”

“None of that, Captain,” he said, meeting my knowing gaze. “I like spending time with her and that’s all you’re going to hear about it. Now let me check your feet.”

“They’re fine.”

“So you say, but it is my job to be sure. Do you know how shameful it would be to have one’s captain die because I failed to treat him?”

“Who dies because of their feet? No. No, don’t list all the foot sicknesses that can carry one to the gods. Wouldn’t that be grand in a funeral song. ‘Taken from us by... green sores.’”

I laughed, but Yitti just tilted his head. “Everything all right, Captain?”

“Yes. No. Oh, I don’t know.” He left a silence that sucked at my thoughts until I said, “I want to believe in Gideon, but... he seems to be living in a whole other world where none of our ways matter anymore. Where... where decency doesn’t matter anymore. I don’t want to follow that path. I almost challenged him today.”

“You’re a good captain, Rah, and you aren’t the only one who has been saying exactly those words,” he said. “But if you think you have the unquestioning loyalty of all your Swords, then you’re wrong. There are

plenty who are just angry and want to fight, who think Gideon has the right idea about the world. Give me your feet.”

“Still attached to my legs? Or would you like them removed first?”

“Now, now, Captain, there’s no need to be like that.” Yitti checked first one foot then the other, spreading my toes with his fingers and tilting them to catch the light. “I’m just warning you that a lot of people believe he’s going to conquer this land to give us a new home, and that’s hard to best in a challenge.”

“Is that what you want?”

He let my foot go. “I don’t know what I want anymore. For now I’ll settle for not having to sew anyone up after tomorrow’s fighting.”



The surrender came as my blade sliced the man’s torso, hip to shoulder, spilling blood and entrails through his woollen tunic. He fell amid Chiltaen cheers. His club followed, dropping to the hard earth with a thud, its head still clean.

Probably a farmer. There had been many mixed in with the soldiers protecting this town, all bearing whatever weapon they had at hand and fighting with desperation, not skill. But they had fallen like warriors and I would honour them as warriors.

I dropped from Jinso’s back amid the moans and screams and death. And while he stood sentry, I sawed into the man’s throat with my knife. An old man, I realized, with greying hair and lines criss-crossing his face. An elder, taking up arms to defend his people. His flesh was tough and ropey like that of old cattle, but I worked steadily, and once I had finished, I set his head aside and moved on to another—a younger man whose life had drained out through a gash in the side of his neck.

While I worked, I was only dimly aware of the battlefield around me, of shouted orders and movement, of heavy hoofbeats and people being hustled away in groups. When I did glance up between bodies, I found Himi standing with a group of my Swords nearby. “Don’t just stand there,” I said. “We have souls to release and the dead to honour.”

“Gideon said—”

“I don’t care what Gideon said. We cannot leave these souls trapped, whatever body they were born to.”

“Yes, Captain.”

While the Chiltaens stormed in to capture the surrendered town, I moved from body to body, my Swords with me. Dishiva didn’t join us, but she didn’t stop a handful of her Swords from doing so and our numbers swelled. I smiled at this little act of rebellion, at seeing so many take my lead.

It didn’t last. All too soon, the order to return to camp swept the battlefield, and with the promise of food and rest, my companions began to disperse.

“Come on, Captain,” Himi said, rising after she had finished one. “We should go.”

“You go. I will stay while there are dead to honour.”

She hesitated, but any hope that she would stay with me vanished with a salute. “As you wish, Captain.”

Almost I snapped an order for her to remain, but I bit it back and kept working with the last few stragglers. Sett arrived soon after.

“Enough, Rah,” he said, his voice reaching me before the muffled sound of his horse’s hooves. “We must go back to the camp.”

“There are still dead to honour.”

A growl rose up his throat. “Damn you, Rah. Can’t you just do what you’re asked? Just once? Gideon said no heads.”

“Why? Because it makes us look like the monstrous barbarians they think us? We’re already slaughtering their people and tearing down their cities.”

“The Chiltaens are doing that, not us.”

I looked up at him looming over me. “What the fuck kind of difference is that?”

“The most important one, which is why Gideon is our herd master and you are not. Now leave the heads and let’s go. If you come now, this can be forgotten. I won’t mention it to—”

“No. Take everyone else with you, but I’m staying.”

He stared down from the back of his horse for a long time, then let out a sigh. “On your own head be it, Rah. Give me the ones you’ve already done.”

“What?”

“Are you deaf as well as stubborn? Give me the heads. I’ll take them back to camp with me and see their souls off.”

“Are you sure you want to do that?”

“No, but since you’ve already cut them, I’m damn well going to, so give me the damn heads.”

I handed them up to him one at a time, and he managed to pile them awkwardly in the space between one crooked arm, his leg, and his chest, necks up so they wouldn’t dribble on him. He probably wouldn’t make it all the way back to camp without losing at least one, but he would go back for it because Sett was a man of his word. It took a stubborn man to know a stubborn man.

My Swords went with him and Jinso began to fret, but he stayed at my side even when a Chiltaen came to shout at me. Not understanding his words made him easy to ignore, and eventually he just kicked me and walked away. Another came a few heads later wielding a spear, but Jinso took exception to his presence and reared, sending the man scurrying.

Expecting a show of force to carry me off at any moment, I cut every throat and sawed every spine as though it would be my last, but the afternoon sank into evening and there I sat, severing heads, my thoughts long since turned to numb soup.

As night fell, it became harder to see what I was doing, though I had done so many by then, my hands seemed to be working on their own. I ought to have taken Jinso back to camp. He needed water and food and rest, but every time I thought a body would be my last, I would see another worthy of compassion. So though it stank and flies buzzed around my face, I stayed. I stayed with the crows and the insects and the occasional wild dog, stayed as the last of the light leaked from the sky.

Having sunk into a foggy-headed haze of congealing blood and tough skin, I did not notice the approaching figure until a lantern swung into my vision. It landed drunkenly on the corpse of the boy I had finished a few heads ago. “For you.” The words were Levanti but the accent was not right, and looking up at my benefactor, I saw only pale material where a face ought to have been.

“Who are you?”

He did not answer, just turned and walked away. I called after him, but the man in the belted grey robe did not look back. Perhaps he was a ghost, a



figment of my fatigued imagination, but ghosts don't usually bring lanterns. And beside the lantern sat a wooden pail full of water. I gave it to Jinso and worked until the lantern ran out of oil. Then in darkness, I continued.



Gideon was waiting for me when I got back. Not the Gideon I had called friend, but the Gideon who had walked away from me at Tian. Hard. Unsmiling. Herd master to exiles.

"You were instructed to leave the heads," he said, standing with his hands on his hips as I rode in. "And return hours ago."

It couldn't have been as late as I thought for the camp was still awake. The group of captains around the nearby fire—Menesor and Yiss and Lashak and the others—all ceased their conversation to watch.

I dropped the pile of heads I'd been able to carry at Gideon's feet and slid from the saddle. "I will not weigh my soul heavy even for my herd master."

It was the same reason we were all here, why we had all been exiled to begin with, yet some nearby Swords shook their heads and a murmur like a swarm of flies buzzed around me. One of the severed heads had rolled into his boot, but Gideon had eyes only for me. "Not even for a brother who asks a sacrifice of you?"

The question pierced my heart like a knife. He had asked me to trust him, asked me to fight for him, but when the lives of Amun and Iya and my saddleboys had been in question, he had given me no choice. Then he had demanded my silence.

"No true brother would ask such a sacrifice," I said.

In the silence, the rest of the camp sounded far away. Beside me, Jinso lifted his head, the clink of his bridle loud by my ear.

"Don't disobey me again, Rah."

"Then give me orders I can follow proudly!"

My shout rang to the dark sky and I stood in its aftermath, gripping Jinso's reins as though they were a safety line to the past, to a time and a place when Gideon had been everything.

But there was no going back now.

“I, Rah e’Torin, challenge you for the leadership of the Levanti herd.”

Indrawn breaths filled the night with gasps, but Gideon only shrugged. “Didn’t I tell you it would happen one day?” he said, a rueful smile returning my old friend for a moment before the cold leader swallowed him again. “Lucky for me that herd masters don’t fight with blades.” He looked to the captains frozen around the fire. “Call the herd.”

In a blink, all was movement. Shouts of “Challenge! The herd master has been challenged!” filled the night, and the captains around the fire got up and began dragging saddlebags and logs out of the way.

Herd masters only occasionally came from the ranks of former Swords, and since it was a position of ultimate leadership, it was decided not by weapons but words. No one could die in such a challenge, but the loser still took a period of exile at one of the shrines or groves to commune with the gods. There were no shrines here and no horse whisperers to care for them, but failure would still mean losing my Swords and, if Gideon chose to leave me behind, death at the hands of the Chiltaens. Once I would have thought such an outcome impossible, but no smile lit Gideon’s eyes or turned his lips as he invited me to join him at the fire.

“I love you, Brother,” he said, his low words for me alone. “But I will win this because I must, for all our sakes.”

There was no time to reply, no time to even think. From all around the camp, Swords were speeding to watch, hustling in a great ring around us as though we were about to do battle.

“Captain,” Yitti said, appearing out of breath at my shoulder. “Are you sure you want to do this? Let me step between you and make peace, before —”

“No, if you do that, it will only happen tomorrow night, or the next. Better now and done. Take care of Jinso.”

I handed over my horse’s reins and walked toward the fire, doubt assailing me at every step. Gideon had been here so long, knew so much... but he had let himself become too much like them, and if we had to be here, had to fight, then we needed to do it like Levanti and hold on to everything we could.

Dishiva stood waiting before the fire, a stick in her hand. It was a poor replacement for a speaker’s rod, but the captains had done what they could in the minutes they’d had. The blackened end still smoked.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” she said, thrusting the stick into my hand. “Try to at least remember you aren’t on the plains anymore, hmm?”

Before I could answer, she melted back into the crowd and I stood alone. Across the other side of the crackling flames, Gideon held his own makeshift rod, and there really was no going back.

Captain Yiss en’Oht stepped into the circle of firelight and lifted her arms, awaiting silence from the watching crowd. When nothing but the crackle and spit of flames cut the night, she spoke. “We call upon the gods to watch over this moment, to bring wisdom to the lips of those who would lead us and strength to the hearts of those who must choose the right path.”

A murmur of agreement spread, and in its wake we sat. Not a moment too soon, for my legs had begun to shake and my stomach churned with panic. Across the fire, Gideon folded his legs beneath himself as calmly as if he had been taking a meal. And having settled, he made no move, just watched me through the flames.

As the challenger, I had the right to speak first, and I wet my lips with my tongue, gripping the speaker’s rod as though it had been a shield.

*I love you, Brother, but I will win this because I must, for all our sakes.*

The Gideon I knew could never have thought this the right path. Eska had been right. We needed to go home.

I lifted the rod’s smoking tip into the air. The watching herd of Swords shuffled and shifted in the darkness around us. “This,” I said, “is not our home. This land belongs to the Kisians and the Chiltaens and whoever else has ties here, not to us who are strangers upon its soil. We don’t need to stay here. We don’t need to build here. We need to go home.”

Gideon had not pulled his gaze from me as I spoke, and in the breaths of silence that followed, he did not lift his rod. He couldn’t be planning to just sit there, silent, which meant he had a plan. I swallowed a lump of panic.

*I will win because I must.*

I stuck my rod into the air again. “You wonder how we can go home when we are prisoners, but we have our horses now. Our weapons. Their trust. And two days ago, we left half the Chiltaen army behind to sack the city of Koi. There has never been a better time to fight for our own freedom instead of the deaths of strangers who have never wronged us.”

Invisible beyond the firelight, footsteps sounded as Swords moved

behind me in agreement. As we spoke, they would vote their allegiance with their bodies, standing silent behind who they wanted to support. It had always seemed tame compared to a Sword's challenge, but now I was sitting here with the speaker's rod in my hand I wanted to be sick.

Gideon's stick sat across his knees like something he had no need for.

"It feels good to fight here," I said, filling the silence when it stretched on between us. "But we gave our oaths to serve and protect our herds, not this herd but the people of the Torin and the Jaroven and the Namalaka, of the Oht and the Injit and the Bedjuti. Our task has never been to build or to conquer but to feed our people and protect them from all harm, and that we cannot do from here."

More Swords moved behind me, the sound of them massing there as great a thrill as a ride into battle. They were listening to me. Agreeing with me.

I was done. There was nothing more I wanted to add, and I lowered my stick for the third time and waited. Gideon stared at me, statue still. Figures shifted in the darkness. Restless movement became whispers and still he did not speak. I found myself urging him to say something, anything, to not admit defeat so easily, for the longer he sat in silence, the more people began to move behind me. I couldn't see how many, but it had to be more than half already.

"Your sentiments are very honourable, Rah," Gideon said at last, no ringing cry to reach the farthest ears, rather a soft reply, made intimate by the way he looked at me and no one else. "We could have achieved so much together, you and I, and I will grieve for what could have been." He set the stick down upon the ground and, rising to his feet, lifted his voice so every Sword might hear. "You have the passion of a true leader, Rah e'Torin, but you live in a past that no longer exists. You have felt the change, you have all felt it even if you wanted to ignore it and pretend it is not there. There was a time we lived free, when a herd needed no Second and Third Swords because hunting was our only purpose. Then the city states decided it was better to take our horses by force rather than trade, to take our land by force, our people, because we were barbarians. We chose to live differently and that made us lesser than them in every way."

Gideon began to pace back and forth before the fire. He ought not to be standing at all, ought not to be looking anywhere but across the fire, but no

one stopped him. A few footfalls changed sides in the darkness.

“But we were not easy to defeat and so they sowed our plains with an evil that gets inside the minds of horsekin and turns them into city folk. It started with our herd masters and our matriarchs and our patriarchs, but it would have taken us too had we stayed. That evil has not followed—”

“If there is such evil on the plains, that’s all the more reason why we must go back!” Gripping my speaking rod, I leapt up to face him. “We cannot abandon our oaths just because the fight got hard.”

“And how do you propose we fight it? Do you plan to kill the Torin herd master?”

“No, I—”

“Kill the Torin matriarchs?”

“No—”

“What about the children? If they have swallowed its lies too, what then?”

I met his stare across the fire, trying not to look at the shifting figures as in the darkness some of the Swords changed sides.

“We need to work together to fix this,” I said. “To fight this evil.”

“How?”

My mouth opened and closed without a sound coming out and Gideon smiled. A smile that twisted at the edges with the same sadness that filled my heart, the same knowledge that we would never regain what we once had, never again laugh together or talk over old times or be at each other’s sides as we faced tomorrow.

“I don’t know,” I said, and still more footsteps moved away from me in the shadows.

“That is why we have to build anew. Here and now, where we can carve out a place in history as more than just the troublesome barbarians the city states waged their conquest upon. Gone are the days where we can live in peace and have it earn us respect. There is no space for that anymore, no place where we can live the old way and be unchallenged by stronger neighbours. This is our chance.”

Cheers broke out, all protocol thrown to the winds, and I wanted to scream at them all, to shake them and remind them that it was nothing but a dream, that we were still prisoners of the Chiltaens, but every time I opened my mouth, the words were drowned out and I knew it would make no

difference.

Only one thing could change their minds now. I lifted my speaker's rod into the air as though it had been a spear. "You cannot choose a leader who knew anyone who chose not to fight would be killed and let it happen anyway!"

The cheers died. Faces turned toward me in the firelight. They looked at Gideon too, trying to understand what I had said, trying to fit this idea into their image of him as I had failed to do myself.

"I did," he said, glaring at me through the smoke. "And I would do it again, because unlike you I know how to make hard decisions. And unlike you, I am willing to risk everything for the future of my people, even when I know it will weigh down my soul. That is a sacrifice I am willing to make for my herd. You will not even make it for a friend."

The revelation ought to have changed things, ought to have swung the balance back my way, but more were walking to his side now, grim figures in the night.

"Did you not hear me?" I said. "The First Swords of Sheth and the Third Swords of Namalaka are dead. All the sick and injured you left behind are dead and so are your saddleboys and -girls. All dead. You had the right to know, and they had the right to choose, but Gideon took that from you because keeping the Chiltaens happy was more important."

"No," he said. "Not for them. Never for them. I did it for the same reason we would Farewell the sick on the plains, because losing a few is always better than losing everyone, even though it hurts."

More footsteps shuffled his way, and he kicked his speaker's rod into the fire, content to say no more.

I faced him across the flames, my chest heaving as I hunted something more I could say to make them all see, but I had spilled my heart and there were no words left. There would be time for the Swords to make up their minds, time for them to move around behind us before the decision was called, but I already knew Gideon had won.

Dread filled my veins, hot like the fire into which I dropped my speaker's rod. As it began to burn, someone new stepped into the firelight—the man who had brought me the lantern on the battlefield. Still masked and hooded, the grey-robed figure began to applaud slowly as though we had been entertaining.

“My countrymen could learn much from your way of choosing leaders,” he said, speaking Levanti though it sounded strange with his accent and emerged stilted. “I already have. Most of you have come down on Herd Master Gideon’s side, I see, but in my eyes his challenger is of much greater value.” He turned to Gideon. “I understand it is your practice to exile people who fail, but since that is not possible under the circumstances, I will save you the difficulty of deciding what to do now. Captain Rah e’Torin and all his Swords are to be transferred to my service.”

No one answered. Even Gideon looked about the circle, unsure. A grimace of confused apology twisted his features as our eyes met across the fire. I drew myself up. “I will take the punishment our laws—”

“No,” the masked man said, soldiers shifting in the gloom behind him. “I’m afraid it was not a request.”

## Chapter 19

### Miko

“Any word from Koi?”

I asked the question in place of a greeting, and Lord Chancellor Goro flinched and bowed in place of an answer. He was a nervous man, perhaps made so by years of trying to walk the line between his emperor and his empress.

“Chancellor?”

“No, Your Highness,” he said, looking at the sun-swept ground between his sandalled feet. “Nothing. Little can be expected at such a time, so I do not take it as... bad news.”

Koi under siege. Emperor Kin dead. I had woken that morning with a knot of dread in my stomach not all my calm reasoning could loosen. Whichever way I looked at it, I stood upon a precipice and the only way forward was with the support of a man who had already said no.

“There is other news?” I said.

“Much, and I understand I am to entrust the reports to you so you may take them to His Majesty.”

Disapproval there, a question too, though last night Master Akio had delivered a communication from His Majesty to that effect.

“Yes, it seems for now that is to be my purpose.” I heaved a long-suffering sigh, and with an outstretched hand suggested we walk out into the gardens. “But given what happened in Koi, I feel it is my duty to do



whatever I can for His Majesty in his time of need.”

The chancellor never smiled, but he nodded something of his satisfaction with my response and walked with me into the sunshine, me with my lies tucked close and he with a whole swathe of papers in his arms.

“Well, Your Highness, it is safe to say His Majesty will not be pleased with today’s news, so be sure to find a way to break it gently.”

“Tell me the worst.”

The man sighed. “I have collated all the messages onto this scroll for him, but in short, we’ve had nothing new from inside Koi, as I said. The towns of”—and here he began reading from a list—“Nonje, Xinhai, Kimotari, and Singye have all been destroyed. Others”—back to the list—“Shirakumo, Kaesan, and Jinanton have surrendered. Changhou and Enkumo would also have been in their path, but we have heard nothing.” He sighed. “There are a few other messages detailing atrocities that I will not burden your ears with, Your Highness, but I have added them to the scroll for His Majesty.”

The images his words conjured seemed out of place in the sun-washed garden as a pair of wrens darted across our path from tree to vine, twitting while they shared their morning dance. The war seemed so far away I could almost imagine it would never touch us here.

Chancellor Goro cleared his throat. “A dispatch came from General Rosoki in the night, as well, Your Highness.”

“Where is he?”

A notch appeared between his brows as he walked. “As per the minister’s orders, General Rosoki left only a skeleton force at Lin’ya and is marching west. It was dated three days ago, but His Majesty knows the land well and will be able to guess at his current location better than I can.”

“Has Minister Manshin not seen it?”

The notch deepened. “Minister Manshin has seen it and will no doubt come to the same conclusion. And speaking of His Excellency, he wishes to lay a few ideas more before His Majesty today and is seeking permission to do so face to face.”

“Out of the question, the sickness—”

“So I said to him, Your Highness. He has requested to see you to discuss the matter this morning.”

To tell him the truth, or not. I closed my eyes and let out a slow breath.

“Yes, of course. Do continue.”

“Continue? Well, Minister Gadokoi has also requested a meeting with His Majesty, as has Governor Dohk. I have taken it upon myself to advise the steward to bring any minor difficulties to me in the near future, with His Majesty sick, Her Majesty... absent, and war upon us.”

He said the words with such matter-of-factness that I had to swallow a laugh, but when amusement passed, it left envy in its wake. How simple to be able to face the world with nothing but ink and paper and a talent for fussy organisation.

“Good,” I agreed. “I am content for you to take care of such minor things until this is over.”

“But His Majesty might prefer—”

“I will check with him, of course.” I held out my hand for the papers. “If there is nothing more, I will take these to him now and see what instructions he has for the day.”

He handed over a pair of scrolls. “And Minister Manshin, Your Highness?”

“Tell him I will see him before the council meeting.”

Chancellor Goro froze like a trapped rabbit. “He is in the council meeting now, Your Highness. I believe they met an hour since.”

Hardly containing my frustration, I nodded to the Chancellor and strode back along the idyllic path, once more disturbing the wrens with the swish of my robe. The emperor’s message had included that I would sit in on the meeting so I might report back to him. Foolish perhaps to think they would consider me necessary, but it galled that even a direct order from the Emperor had not seen me included.

I might have been angry enough to burst in, but by the time I arrived, having taken the stairs at an indecorous pace, the council had already risen. Through the dispersing group outside the council chamber, Minister Manshin bore down upon me.

“Your Highness.” He bowed with great deference, though the flash in his eyes might well have set the matting on fire. “His Majesty has heard the latest from the north?”

“Yes, indeed,” I said, my annoyance surely rivalling his. “Do correct me if I am wrong, Minister, but I believe His Majesty sent word that I would sit with the council this morning, yet you called the meeting without me.”

Behind him, the voices of the other councillors dissipated as they departed about their business, but finding himself abandoned did nothing to diminish his assurance. “Indeed we received your message, Your Highness.” He looked down on me, for although I was far too tall for a woman, Minister Manshin had me by half a head. “But while Her Majesty would on occasion join the council, there is no precedent for any female below the rank of empress to be allowed such an honour. They are not my rules, but they are the rules by which *even Emperor Kin has always abided.*”

Now was the time to tell him the truth, to make a plea for his help, but as soon as I parted my lips to speak I shut them again. He had kept from the council the knowledge that Kin was badly injured, but the death of the emperor was different, and I was still not his heir.

“And yet they were his orders, straight from his own lips this morning,” I said and caught the relief in the lightening of his brow and the relaxing of his shoulders.

“I am glad to hear he goes on well. I will see him.”

“Yes, you may when he is done resting and sends for you.”

The minister’s eyes narrowed, drawing rangy brows low. “I need his counsel on these matters now. The bulk of the southern battalions are due to arrive today and we must decide where to make our stand.”

“At Risian.”

“That is what he said yesterday, but with the arrival of the southern battalions, we could surprise them near Battaga if we move quickly.”

My knowledge stretched to knowing where Battaga was on a map but no further. Fortunately, the man before me had enough knowledge for both of us.

“What is the chance of reaching Battaga in time?”

Minister Manshin wiggled a pair of fingers and looked up. “Maybe... half? It is a risk, but the blow to their army would be significant if they aren’t expecting us there.”

“And the blow to ours should we not make it on time?”

“No losses, but it could mean giving up preparation time at Risian. As well as prompting them to attack there before Grace Bahain and General Rosoki have had time to arrive.”

Tanaka’s military tutor had once assisted the minister of the left under

Emperor Lan Otako. He had been fiercely loyal to Mother, but Tanaka had hated him, partly because he looked about a thousand years old and had a dusty cough, and partly because he had ended every lesson with a problem. If Tanaka didn't work through it correctly, he wasn't allowed to go out riding. I wasn't allowed to take part because I was but a girl, but when the man had gone blind, I had started writing down answers for Tanaka to say.

"A difficult decision, I see," I said, thinking of the old tutor with his pale eyes and wispy brows. "Perhaps the best way to decide is to think about what is best for the empire. Hitting them at Battaga is a small chance of a big success while making a stand at Risian is a big chance of a small success. Which does Kisia need right now?"

"Assured protection. Yes. You are right, we will make the stand at Risian." The scowl had lifted from his brow and he let out a pleased little laugh. "You do your father proud, Your Highness."

Which father he meant I could not ask, for although we were alone in the passage, I was acutely aware of how exposed we were. As the brief enjoyment we had found in discussing army movements wore off, he looked around for unseen watchers and once more stiffened into his earlier formality. "I shall send His Majesty's orders, Your Highness."

He bowed only to straighten with spine-snapping speed and stride away along the passage. Before he could reach the landing, Chancellor Goro intercepted him, out of breath. "Ah, there you are, Your Excellency, I have been looking for you."

"More bad news, Chancellor?"

I approached slowly, but though his gaze flicked to me, it was Minister Manshin the chancellor spoke to. "The southern battalions have arrived, Your Excellency, bringing... a message. From Grace Bachita."

My stomach dropped as again the man's gaze leapt my way.

"He will be here within the hour and has..." The chancellor pressed his lips shut.

"And has?"

The man took a deep breath, the expansion of his gut straining the knot of his sash. "The message says he is accompanied by His Majesty's son, Prince Jie Ts'ai, and by Lord Oyamada." Though he had finished speaking, his mouth hung open. And when Minister Manshin did not immediately answer, he looked to me and said, "Is that... Did you...?"

“Yes,” I said, forcing a smile I would rather have eaten. “I was aware. Ensure a proper welcome is organised. I shall inform His Majesty.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

He bowed, but I had already spun away, my face burning as I strode toward the emperor’s apartments, the loud clack of my sandals the only sign of anger I allowed myself. Hands that wanted to ball I kept loose, tears that wanted to fall I held back, because someone is always watching. Watching for a reaction, for some treasonous twitch—anything that could be used against me.

I would not let them win.



The entire population of the palace gathered in the courtyard, the few remaining lords and ladies of the court, the councillors and their secretaries, servants, and guards. In the grandest of robes, I stood tall and proud, hoping no one could see past my mask to the turmoil beneath. I had needed more time.

My rank positioned me between the minister of the left and the minister of the right, but so many listening ears made it impossible to take advantage of such good fortune. Manshin’s thoughts seemed as far away as my own, and he offered nothing more than commonplace replies to Minister Gadokoi’s attempts at conversation.

“And at such a time, too,” Minister Gadokoi said, shifting his weight for the hundredth time. The two men couldn’t have been more different. Gadokoi was a man of numbers. He had oversight of the Imperial Treasury as well as town planning, agriculture, and trade; the number of lesser ministers and secretaries that answered to him was staggering. So while Manshin had been a soldier all his life and owned the physique to match, Gadokoi looked like a scribe, even requiring round glasses that pinched his nose like a bird’s talons upon a branch.

“How frustrating for His Majesty to have to stay abed at such a moment,” Gadokoi went on, not requiring a reply.

“It is a shame Her Majesty isn’t here to see this,” said Mei’lian’s governor, Niyo Dohk. He turned, a mean little smile souring his handsome

face. “Watching her realise all that work in Koi was for nothing would have been a sight worth seeing.”

“As fine a sight as watching her see her son killed?” Not my words, though I had wanted to speak them. Minister Manshin had joined the conversation with a scowl. “Some things are beneath even you to find amusing, Dohk.”

“Killed? Executed for treason, surely, Excellency.” The governor’s sharp eyes whipped my way. “There is a great difference between the two.”

The old soldier folded his arms. “Dead is dead. The words are mere quibbles in the eyes of a parent, but then I suppose you wouldn’t know that since your wife has yet to bear a child. Is that why you want to see everyone else’s dead?”

The Governor’s cheeks heated like coals and he opened his mouth to retort, but Minister Gadokoi smilingly interrupted. “Two things,” he said, adjusting the sit of his glasses. “First, this is not the time for this sort of discussion. We are here representing His Majesty. Second, send her to Giana.”

“What?” Niyo Dohk said while Minister Manshin barked a laugh.

“Giana,” the minister of the right repeated, adjusting his glasses in a look altogether innocent. “The healing waters are supposed to be especially beneficial in aiding barren wombs.”

Finding myself the invisible centre of a three-way argument, I maintained my impression of a statue.

“You know from personal experience, eh—?”

The deep resonant boom of the gong interrupted what might have been an amusing discussion, and they spun to face the opening gates, appearing to the rest of the world like a group of mature and unified leaders. The crowd craned their necks, but we were all to be disappointed. Where Emperor Kin always chose to ride on horseback, his son made his first appearance in Mei’lian shut inside a carriage and hedged in by a procession of city guards.

Petals scattered before the horses’ hooves as the carriage swept in through the gate, slowing to a graceful halt before the gathered court. My gut writhed, but I clasped my hands before me and rolled my shoulders as a servant stepped forward to open the carriage door.

Grace Bachita Ts’ai stepped out first, an imposing figure in as much

crimson silk as the law allowed him to wear. Like his cousin, he carried imperial confidence like a cloak, but where responsibility had emaciated the emperor, wealth had thickened his cousin's already broad physique.

Taking my cue, I started down the steps, the court parting before me like a silken sea.

"Welcome to Mei'lian, Uncle Bachi." I lifted my chin, forcing him to acknowledge me with a bow. "I hope you had a pleasant journey."

"We did indeed, Your Highness," he said, rising from his bow to search my face with sharp eyes. "Though I must admit surprise that you are here to meet us. Where is my cousin?"

"*His Majesty* has unfortunately contracted a bout of yellow fen fever and is confined to his rooms until all danger of it spreading has passed."

His eyes narrowed. "Yellow fen fever?"

"Yes, Uncle. He wished me to impart his apologies, to you and—" I looked past him as another man stepped out of the carriage. Like Grace Bachita he had greying hair and a lined face, but where Bachita's features were harsh, the man I could only presume was Lord Oyamada had fine bones and haughtily arched brows.

Despite his air of superiority, he bowed deeply. "Your Highness," he said, his voice like cold silk. "An honour to meet you. And to be able to introduce your *brother* to you."

Brother. The word sent a jolt of anger through me, intensified by the grief I could not show. I'd already had a brother and did not need another.

Prince Jie Ts'ai alighted from the carriage like a dog called to heel, and as one, the assembled court bowed. He looked no more than his eleven years and cast his eyes down like an animal that had been kicked one too many times. Even something about the shape of his eyes reminded me of Shishi, completing the picture of the puppy prince. I bowed, showing the same depth of respect I had been required to show Tanaka upon formal occasions, though my nails dug into my palms.

"Your Highness," I said, smiling at him as I rose. "Welcome to Mei'lian. I am Princess Miko Ts'ai, your sister."

The boy looked up. The boy looked down. Hard to say in such a fleeting glance whether he took after his father. Lord Oyamada stepped into the silence, his hand protectively upon the boy's shoulder. "We are greatly fatigued from our journey."

I lifted my hand just as Emperor Kin did to call his chancellor, and like magic, Goro appeared. The power felt good. “Chancellor, my brother is fatigued, I will show him to his rooms. Have everything brought up.”

The gathered court bowed as we passed through them and into the outer palace before they could get more than a glimpse of this new prince. Better to whisk him away than let him linger and make an impression.

“Is this your first visit to Mei’lian, brother?” I said, walking beside him, his shorter legs forcing me to slow my stride to match his.

“It is,” Lord Oyamada answered, keeping close on the boy’s other side. “Fears for Prince Jie’s safety have kept us in Ts’ai since his birth.”

“Ah, you are fortunate to have such wise guardians.” I looked at the prince as I spoke, not at his grandfather. “If I could have foregone all the attempts on my life, I would have chosen to. It is not pleasant to grow up knowing someone would rather you did not.”

Prince Jie lifted his eyes to mine for a moment, his lips forming an answer he was not allowed to utter. “His Majesty knows how best to take care of what is most important,” Grace Bachita said from behind us. “You have not done so very poorly, little Miko. Not that you’re so little now, though. You must be at least a head taller than your poor mother, though not her equal in beauty.”

“Few are equal to her beauty, so I take that as no insult.”

He chuckled. “Too bad young men have no interest in quick wit, hmm?”

I led the way out through the last courtyard toward the gardens, wondering whether they would ever let me talk to the prince alone. He was not what I had expected and might prove an ally if I could get him away from his overprotective guardians.

“Nasty business,” Grace Bachita went on when I didn’t reply. “With your brother. The boy was a firebrand from birth. He’d have been better broken if he’d been my son, but what was to be done when your mother doted on him as she did? A terrible loss for you, my dear, but Kin knows what he is about.”

*It was a joy to watch him die.*

“I must, indeed, bow to the wisdom of my betters.”

“You might not have inherited your mother’s beauty, but I see you have her nasty, sneering habit,” he said. “Stupid woman should never have underestimated a Ts’ai. She ought to have known he would get his revenge,



no matter how long he had to wait and how patient he had to be.”

“That is unworthy of you, Uncle,” Prince Jie said, goaded to speech that, however quiet, had a confident, vibrant quality.

“Indeed it is.” Lord Oyamada shot a sidelong sneer at Grace Bachita. “We ought ever to be as gracious in success as in defeat.”

“Well you would know all about defeat.”

While the pair aimed sharp little barbs at each other I smiled at Jie, wondering if there was more to this prince than had first appeared. Minister Manshin had been all for trusting in Kin’s wisdom, and though I could see nothing but malice in the elevation of Grace Bachita and Lord Oyamada, his son may yet prove to have inherited something worthwhile. Either way, the moment Emperor Kin’s death was discovered it would be this boy who decided my fate. Or perhaps it would be his controlling guardians?

The room designated for his use had belonged to Tanaka not so long ago, but already the paintings had been changed and his clothes were gone. Even the poem Edo had inked for him was missing from the wall. No personal touches, no little ornaments. Nothing but large windows letting light fall upon fine furnishings and fresh matting.

Lord Oyamada walked right in and turned a circle in the middle of the floor, noting with a nod the sleeping chamber off one side. “Very nice.”

“It’s the imperial palace, Oyamada, what were you expecting?”

Grace Bachita received no reply as he strode in looking unimpressed, leaving Prince Jie alone beside me in the doorway. “I hope you will be comfortable here, Brother,” I said, trying to smile as though it would keep my heart from breaking. “It belonged to another prince before you, one equally trapped and manipulated but a lot less loved.”

He looked up and for a moment our eyes met, but whatever kindness and pity I saw made no difference. Jie might turn out to be as good as everyone hoped, but he was not the brother I wanted, not the brother I loved and missed so much his loss was like a fistful of needles in my heart.

I turned away, my face hot. Footsteps were coming along the passage.

“Ah, there you are, Chancellor,” Grace Bachita said, stepping past me in a gust of sweat and ink and the tang of dried inchi flowers all southerners added to their washing water. “We’ll have lunch served here and then I’ll meet with the council. Got to have someone taking control of things while His Majesty is ill.”

“We’ll both meet with the council,” Oyamada corrected. “And when he’s feeling up to having visitors, we’ll see His Majesty too. We can keep our distance if he’s infectious, or a properly placed screen would allow us to at least speak to him without risk.”

Every lie I had told about the emperor’s illness dammed behind the lump of grief in my throat and would neither be swallowed nor spoken.

“Or I can just see him myself.” Grace Bachita stomped back past me as though I wasn’t there. “Her Highness is not the only one who had yellow fen fever as a child. She need no longer be troubled with the business of running messages now I am here.”

“Oh, very good, Your Grace,” the chancellor said. “I am sure that will be acceptable. I will have lunch served as soon as may be and have already directed your servants to the rooms prepared for yourself and Lord Oyamada a little farther along the passage. I will also inform the council to expect His Highness—”

“Prince Jie is too tired from his journey for such things today. A tour of the palace might be more to his taste.”

The prince stared at his feet as I had been staring at mine, but where he ought to have stood up for himself and told his guardians he would attend the council, he said nothing. My brother had died to make space for this boy and I had wanted to hate him for it, but I could not. I could only pity him, a pity that swelled my anger. I was better, stronger, smarter, yet they would give the weak boy the throne because he had the one thing I did not. A cock.



To make sure Grace Bachita did not try to visit him, I took my lunch in Emperor Kin’s rooms, but I could do no more than move the food from plate to plate and sit watching the tea chill in my bowl. I had run out of plans. Any moment, someone would find out he was dead and the best I could hope for was that my new brother would show me kindness—unlikely with Grace Bachita in his ear. I needed to talk to him alone, to find out for sure who Prince Jie was.

When the council meeting convened and the prince set off about his

tour, I slipped a pair of coins into a messenger's hand and waited while he was shown around the inner palace. On any other day I might have understood why it took so long, but today all I could manage was a grudging respect for the grand spire. Four floors tall it soared, each owning a round landing joined to the next with curving stairs. A trio of intricately wrought lanterns hung through the centre, decorative by day, while at night they threw a pattern of light and shadow that had brought more than one artist to tears, though an army of councillors and secretaries and courtiers came and went every day, inured to its beauty.

"And these railings had to be recast by the imperial ironworker, along with the lanterns and the hinges on the main doors," said Chancellor Goro as they finally descended the lowest stairs. I feigned interest in the oath carved into the palace doors.

"The doors have protected this building and the imperial family on no fewer than five occasions," the chancellor went on, closer now. "Three of them before the construction of the outer palace in 1089."

I read through the oath a few more times. Footsteps came across the round entrance hall.

"They had to be refitted after the rebellion, of course, but—Ah, Your Highness."

"Oh, good afternoon, Chancellor. Your Highness." A nod to Goro, a bow to His Highness the puppy dog. He looked bored and didn't meet my gaze. Not a good start. "Are you enjoying the tour so far, Brother?"

"Yes, Highness," the boy mumbled.

The chancellor cleared his throat. "We should continue. There is much to see."

"Indeed there is." I stepped aside that they might go on their way, and on cue, the messenger ran in through the doors.

"Chancellor." He bowed. "Governor Dohk requires your presence, my lord."

"Inform him that I shall join him in an hour."

"I'm afraid he insists it is a matter of great urgency, my lord."

With a frustrated click of the tongue, Lord Goro glanced sidelong at his silent companion, perhaps weighing up whether he could take the boy with him. But Governor Dohk was a difficult man, and one who would be all too keen to get his claws into the young and impressionable new prince. That,

of course, had made him the perfect choice for my ruse. In truth Governor Dohk was probably out at one of his favourite wine houses.

I let out a sigh. “No doubt you will find him fretting over a triviality,” I said and turned to Prince Jie. “You will soon learn that no one at court is as loud as Governor Dohk. If it would assist you, Lord Chancellor, I could continue your tour until you return. I warrant I know almost as much about the palace as you.”

Lord Oyamada had made it clear he did not wish his grandson anywhere near me, but my affected disinterest seemed to cut through Lord Goro’s defences.

“I am sure you won’t be long,” I added when he wavered, looking from me to the Prince to the still-bowing servant. “You may rejoin us as soon as you are finished.”

“Indeed, Your Highness. My thanks to you. I shall be as quick as I can.”

A bow to both of us, and Chancellor Goro dashed off in unseemly haste. He would return just as quickly when he realised Governor Dohk wasn’t waiting for him, but by then we would be lost in the maze of the outer palace and difficult to locate.

“Come, Your Highness. I promise not to bore you with the history of railings and hinges.”

That garnered a faint smile, and he followed a step behind as I led the way out to the colonnade joining the outer palace to the inner. A sharp breeze cut through the pillars. It stirred our skirts and tugged at the strands of Jie’s hair that had fallen loose of his severe topknot—exactly the topknot Emperor Kin had always worn. Smart of his guardians to try for the emperor’s likeness.

“These are, as you can see, the palace gardens,” I said as we reached the halfway point between the two palaces. “They are impossible to get lost in because you can always see both buildings no matter where you are. It’s a bit like walking in a rut. A pretty rut.”

No answer. Wisteria vines curled up the pillars, their fallen blossoms blanketing the stones and giving the air a sickly scent.

“And, unfortunately, at this time of year you must be careful not to slip,” I went on. “These rotting petals can get very slimy beneath your sandals.”

“They ought to be swept up.” His first words, neither harsh nor petulant, rather spoken in the pragmatic tone of someone to whom another course of

action made no sense.

“It is tradition, I’m afraid, Your Highness. One of the court priests could explain it in detail, though their explanation did not help Governor Ohi when he slipped and broke his arm.”

“I know it’s a tradition. But it is foolish to put people at risk of injury.”

I eyed his profile. Some small likeness to His Majesty there, but not much. More in the matter-of-fact way he spoke.

The outer palace was little more than a thick wall surrounding the inner palace, but it owned more passages and small rooms and courtyards than anyone knew what to do with. There were many important rooms where Chancellor Goro would look for us, so instead I steered the prince down a little-used passage toward the servant’s sanctuary.

“Let me guess,” I said after a second corridor passed in silence. “Your guardians warned you not to talk to me.”

He didn’t reply, but the reddening of his cheeks was answer enough.

“I promise not to eat you,” I said. “And I can assure you I am not the monstrous enemy I have been painted. My duty is to the empire the same as yours.”

“But you’re an Otako.”

The stone courtyard bounced his words back to us, the echo seeming to flutter bamboo leaves and send petals swirling. “Yes,” I said as his words faded. “And you are a Ts’ai. Perhaps you have been taught that this makes us enemies, but you will find no history book that agrees. Our parents did not get along. That is no reason why we should not.”

“No, but I was told you would say that. Or rather that Her Majesty would say that and insist upon me marrying you for the stability of the empire.”

We had entered the next passage, empty but for dust motes and faded watercolours. I stopped and turned an understanding smile on him. “And you don’t want to marry me?”

“I don’t want to marry anyone.”

“You might change your mind in a few years, but in the meantime you can be sure I have no more interest in marrying you than you have in marrying me. And my mother is not here, which is fortunate since she has a habit of getting her own way.”

He returned my exaggerated grimace and for the first time looked less

like a harangued puppy. The rueful smile that followed brought his face to life. I had never known Emperor Kin without his scars, but Prince Jie shared little in common with his old portraits. He must have taken after his mother, a soft beauty if Jie's features were any indication. Better he had inherited some of his father's harsher lines, for it was a warrior Kisia needed now, not a fair and personable diplomat.

"Mine too," he said, still with that rueful smile. "Mama always gets her way. At least, almost always. She wanted to come here with me, but grandfather said it would look weak were I seen still hanging on my mother's skirts and ordered her to remain in Ts'ai."

"Wise indeed," I said. "Best to make your first impression without an overbearing mother at your side. Although better still without two overbearing guardians."

The boy rolled his eyes and plonked down onto a deep windowsill in a puff of dust. "I wish," he said. "Do you know they fight *all* the time and are always hissing in my ear about how useless the other is? Between that and the constant 'Emperor Kin would want you to do this' and 'Emperor Kin would never do that,' I have often wished I could send them both away."

"My mother forced us to train at arms three hours a day, up at dawn in any weather. 'You don't get to choose the weather of a battle,'" I said, imitating her voice. "And our tutors were no better. I can recite the names of every Kisian emperor in order. If we didn't get it right, we didn't eat."

"Emperor Kin Ts'ai, first of his name," he said, checking his father's name off on one finger while his eyes lost focus in an effort of memory. "Emperor Tianto Otako, fourth of his name. Emperor Lan Otako, third of his name. Emperor Yamato Otako, third of his name. Emperor Tsubasa Otako, fourth of his name. Emperor—"

"Enough," I laughed, pressing a hand to my heart. "Please stop. You're torturing me."

Prince Jie grinned. "I can do the dates too, if you like."

"Oh, you poor boy."

"Oh yes, I was not allowed to leave the estate very often. Dull is an understatement."

"No brothers or sisters?"

"No, just me and a steady diet of General Kin's war diaries as bedtime stories." He huffed a sigh. "A brother would have been nice, I guess, though

in truth, I would like some peace every now and then. When I am old enough not to need them anymore, I look forward to sending grandfather and Uncle Bachi away.”

Time to find out if there was any steel beneath his soft exterior. “You could send them away now. You don’t need them.”

He shrank away as though struck. “But... I wouldn’t know what to do.”

“You would listen to the advice of your ministers and your council and then make up your own mind. That’s what ruling is. Not about what they want, not about what Emperor Kin would do, about what you think is right.”

“I... I don’t think they would go. I don’t think they would listen.”

“Because they don’t want you to take away their power. But it’s you who is Emperor Kin’s son. Your uncle and your grandfather owe their positions and their power entirely to you. Threaten to take it away and they will listen well enough.”

Prince Jie got up from his windowsill, eyes on the floor. “We... we should continue the tour. Grandfather will not like that I have sat talking to you.”

An answer, if not the one I had hoped for.

“No, indeed.” We started to walk back. “At least your father will be pleased we get along.”

“Do you think so? I have not often met him, but he has never had anything kind to say about you or—”

“Or my brother? Or my mother? No, but he is a pragmatic man and would not wish us enemies.”

We walked back the way we had come, silent for a time as we passed through the courtyard with its trembling bamboo. Only when we re-entered the long passage did he say “Is His Majesty going to die? I know I shouldn’t say that, but...”

“Do you want him to?”

“No! I mean, he scares me, but... I don’t think I’m—”

“Jie? Jie!” Lord Oyamada’s voice reverberated along the passage.

The young prince closed his eyes. “Here we go.”

“Don’t worry, I will act bored and very glad to give you back into his care and he will be satisfied,” I whispered as his grandfather drew nearer.

He shot me a grateful smile.

“We are here, Lord Oyamada,” I called out as the man appeared at the other end of the passage, Chancellor Goro at his side. “His Imperial Highness has been... quiet company, but I think he enjoyed the gardens.”

Stiff as a board, Lord Oyamada bowed to the proper depth, though the manicured point of his little beard made his tight-lipped smile look sour. “Your Highness,” he said. “And how is His Majesty this afternoon?”

“A little better,” I said. “Master Akio is hopeful it may only be a few more days before he can emerge from his rooms and ride out with the army to Risian.”

Lord Oyamada’s brows rose. “Ride out? I know His Majesty has ever been untiring, but he ought to rest before he pushes himself.”

“There is no time for rest, my lord,” I said, not glancing at Prince Jie though I could feel his gaze on me. “This is not just a war but a conquest, and we are losing. Better he die fighting to protect his empire than in his bed waiting for them to come to him. At least, so His Majesty thinks.”

Chancellor Goro cleared his throat. “I shall of course counsel him to rest,” he said. “An Emperor need not be upon the battlefield. That is what one has generals for, and a minister of the left. Minister Manshin is well up to the task.”

“Indeed, he is, Chancellor,” I said. “But the men always fight harder and better with their emperor in the field. Emperor Lan lost more battles from his throne than Emperor Kin ever has from the back of his horse.”

A rumble of reluctant approval came from Lord Oyamada. “And Emperor Lan still died by the work of a blade, though he thought himself safe.” He made a satisfied little sound and, excusing himself with a bow, guided the boy away. I watched them go, Chancellor Goro snapping back into his interrupted history lecture as though he had never stopped.

“If we go this way, you can see the Foundation Arch,” he said. “A stone gifted from each ruling family—”

I left them to it, though it was tempting to follow just long enough to hear Goro’s answer when Prince Jie inevitably asked why no Ts’ai stone stood in the Foundation Arch. *Because the Ts’ai were paupers a generation ago* would not have been a conciliatory response and would go down about as well as explaining that the keystone held the Otako sigil because the Otakos *were* Kisia. Ever since its founding, we had held the empire together.





The guards outside His Majesty's apartments spoke not a word as I passed between them, sliding the door myself with yet another scroll from the chancellor tucked under my arm. Light bloomed through the paper panes of Kin's darkened sleeping quarters, throwing up the shadow of a figure bent over the altar of incense and stinking herbs. Glad to have caught Akio, I went in, words already upon my lips as the second pair of doors parted company without a sound.

"Master A—"

My heart dropped. There, beside Kin's body, knelt Grace Bachita. He had drawn back the crimson sheet to display Emperor Kin's corpse, its skin as dry as bark.

"Good evening, little Miko," Bachita said, and for a single, brief moment the weight of my falsehood fell away. "Come, join me. I think you and I had better talk about this."

I closed the door behind me but did not go to him. The shifting weight of my sandals made the salt-strewn matting crack. "I did it for Kisia." My words a desperate whisper. "If people knew, they would be afraid. They need to believe the soldier emperor fights for them."

Lit only by flickering prayer candles, Grace Bachita's smile covered my skin in shivers. "You are very clever. You always know just what to say. I hope the ministers were sufficiently impressed with your lies."

He touched his dead cousin's cheek. "He has been... well preserved." Akio had tended the body, taking time throughout the day to undress it, to clean it, and to dry it with salts and rub in scented oils. It was not a Kisian custom, but it was keeping the worst smells at bay. "But no one will believe this a recently dead body when it suits you to announce it. Ice would have been smarter."

"And far more conspicuous. What are you going to do?"

"You mean am I going to tell everyone what a lying little traitor you are? I wouldn't do such a thing to my wife."

Wife. I clenched my teeth. "I do not appreciate your presumption. It is unbecoming, *Uncle*."

"As is lying about a corpse." He lifted a bowl of wine from the prayer

altar and sipped. “I knew you were lying because when I had yellow fen fever as a child, so did he. And since you can only get it once...”

My stomach dropped. Still upon the door, my fingers began to tremble, and for a mad moment I thought to run. Just run, along the hall and out through the palace, into the city and... and what? I had not been born to be a seamstress. I had been born an Otako. The empire’s keystone.

“Don’t worry,” Bachita said, taking another sip of his wine. “I won’t miss him. A dead Kin cannot set Oyamada above me. Neither can a dead Kin object to a marriage that ensures my place and the future of my heirs. You may not be the beauty I had hoped for, but your breeding more than makes up for it. Kin always said the only good Otako was a dead Otako, but I disagree. The best place for an Otako is in my stable.”

“I am no one’s broodmare!”

Grace Bachita laughed, and I couldn’t help but feel his first wife had been wise to escape into death some years previously. “I think you and I will get along well, my dear,” he said. “And who knows, if something happens to little Jie, your children may yet be emperors.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Well, not informing the court the emperor was dead is one thing, but killing him? Oh don’t look so shocked, my dear, who wouldn’t believe it after what he did to your brother?” He shook his head and clicked his tongue. “Poor Prince Jie will be heartbroken.”

He gestured for me to step closer. “Your move, Your Highness.”

I stood, vacillating between the terrible choice and the worse when, because bad news never came on its own, hurried footsteps sounded in the passage. A knock shook the outer door. “Your Highness?”

Chancellor Goro. Leaving Grace Bachita with the body, I hurried out to the main door and slid the screen. “Yes, Chancellor?”

“Ah, His Grace is here too,” he said looking over my shoulder with a noticeable deflation of relief. His face was white. “We have received news from Koi. One of you must tell His Majesty at once.” The chancellor swallowed, his twisted grimace halting my heart. “The city... the city has fallen. The castle has been taken.”

Koi. The impenetrable castle. Ancestral home of the Otakos. Fear spilled its shards of ice through my body.

“Mama?”

The chancellor shook his head. “No word, Your Highness.”

I knew not if that was a good sign or bad, only that the hope and fear mingling in my heart made every breath a short gasp. She might have been captured, or she was dead. Selfishly, I hoped she was alive, though no doubt she would have preferred death to imprisonment.

Grace Bachita came to stand beside me, his face red where Goro’s had paled. “How did they take it?”

“The message says... it says the city was infiltrated and the gates opened from inside, Your Grace.”

Goose pimples prickled my skin.

“Who?” Bachita demanded.

“Our informant does not say.”

“And who is our informant?”

The chancellor lowered the scroll. “Legate Andrus of Chiltae.”

“What? Why?”

The minister of the left cleared his throat as he appeared beside the chancellor, turning the doorway into an informal meeting place. “I imagine, Your Grace, because he wished to inform us not only of the strength of his army but the reach of his influence. If he can get someone inside Koi who can kill enough guards to open the city, then he can do it here too. He wants us to be afraid.”

If it was fear he wanted then he had succeeded. The war had seemed far away, a problem always for tomorrow, but while I had been scheming for the throne, the Chiltaens and their allies had marched interminably on.

“What do we do now, Minister?” I said. Focusing on the fate of the empire made it easier not to think about Mama.

“We show we will not be so easily frightened and meet them at Risian.”

“Meet them at—” Grace Bachita huffed an angry laugh. “I said this was a mad idea at the meeting and now it is even more so. Send the southern battalions to their deaths for nothing? If the Chiltaens have people inside Koi, what is to say they do not have them inside our camps? How did they know about the four battalions marching for Tian? How did they get inside an impenetrable castle? How have they managed to counter and defeat every attack? Someone is feeding them information. Someone who knows a lot more about our movements than they ought to be trusted with.”

His eyes rolled to Minister Manshin, who ignored the implied

accusation. “You have a better suggestion than the plan His Majesty has outlined, Your Grace?”

“Yes. We pull every soldier we have back to the Tzitzzi River. It has few crossings and is easy to defend.”

A beat of awful silence followed before Minister Manshin inhaled a great breath, swelling his chest and lifting his shoulders. “You are suggesting we abandon half the empire. Half. The whole of the northern empire. Without a fight. The trade markets of Suway. Risian’s golden hills. The old Kuroshima shrine at Kogahaera that has been there as long as we have held these lands. Lin’ya. Syan. And half of the Valley where so much of our food is grown.”

“These are grave losses, but sacrifices must be made to save what we can. If we retreat now, we will still have enough soldiers to hold the river. If we waste them fighting losing battles, then we will not even be able to defend that.”

The two men glared at one another over the threshold. The chancellor cleared his throat. “I am... I am sure His Majesty, in his infinite wisdom, will make the right choice.”

“Oh yes, I am quite confident he will agree with me and make the right choice,” Grace Bachita said, and I didn’t need to look at him to hear the smile in his words. To know he was looking at me. “If I know anything of my cousin, he will sign the retreat order. At once. Don’t you agree, little Miko?”

## Chapter 20

### Rah

We were removed from the Levanti camp on the orders of a man who wore no uniform and carried no weapon—moved to tents right near Legate Andrus and his commanders just because a faceless man had said so.

In silence, my Swords and I carried our belongings away from all that was familiar, from the songs and the chatter, the shrines and the night prayers and the very scent of our horses, watched all the way by unkind eyes. The Chiltaen soldiers did not spit at us or jeer, but they kept their distance, disgust twisting every face.

The faceless man had saved me from one shame only to plunge us into another.

To make things worse, we arrived at our new tents to find Chiltaens moving out of them. Not ordinary soldiers, but men in belted grey uniforms and segmented armour, each piece of which had been engraved with a face that owned only eyes. They muttered and glared at us as they carried their belongings away.

“What’s going on, Captain?” Juta whispered, clutching his saddlebag to his chest.

“I don’t know.”

Himi and Istet were standing nearby, meeting the evicted Chiltaens glare for glare. “I think we’ve taken their job and they don’t like it,” Istet said. “I can’t say I like it either. Maybe keep your mouth shut next time, eh,

Captain?”

“Captain e’Torin?”

Tor stood a small distance away as though he dared not get too close. “Yes?” Stung by Istet’s words, it came out as a snap.

The saddleboy flinched. “The captain of the Blessed Guard wishes to know how many of your Swords he has to make space for.”

“Oh, there’s... eighty-two of us.”

“Eighty-one,” Yitti said. “We lost Maat tonight.”

The answer was relayed to one of the men in grey, who replied with many exasperated hand gestures.

“It will have to be two per tent and one for you, Captain,” the boy said, and he sounded apologetic as though it were not an improvement on the four per tent we’d just come from. “And His... Grace”—the word was spoken with the care of something newly learnt—“would like to see you.”

“Who?”

“Just come.” Tor crossed his arms. “I don’t know how the fuck to explain who he is.”

Leaving Yitti to see everyone settled, I followed Tor a short distance to a large tent much like Gideon’s but with its flap rolled open in welcome. Unlike Gideon’s, it was sparsely furnished, with only a sleeping mat unrolled upon a faded carpet and an open chest of books. The masked man stood in the middle, his hands clasped restfully before him.

“Ah, Captain e’Torin,” he said, the mask shifting with the movement of his lips. “Thank you for coming to see me. I was very impressed by your arguments tonight.”

“You seem to have been the only one.”

“Not true. You were outnumbered, yes, but you did not stand alone.”

I shifted my weight and stared past his ear at the play of lamplight on the tent wall. It had been a long day and I had run out of clever things to say.

“You’re troubled,” the man said after a time. “You are thinking this is a very bad place to find yourself, but I assure you it is not.”

I went on staring at the wall.

“You have questions.”

When I didn’t answer, he added, “You might find me different from many of my countrymen.”

At that I met his gaze, his eyes seeming to shine through the mask’s

slits. “You speak Levanti.”

“I do”

“How?”

“It’s easy to learn a language when you hear it around you constantly. And I am very good at listening.”

“That’s a terrible answer. I hear Chiltaen all the time, and it hasn’t helped much beyond knowing things like *horse* and *dog* and *fuck off you fuckers*.” Not only had this man saved me, it was clear he held some position of authority in the camp and I ought to have watched my tongue, but I was past caring.

The man in the mask laughed. “I like you, Rah e’Torin. What is on the inside is what you see on the outside. That makes you far more trustworthy than most.”

“Who are you?”

“My name is Leo Villius,” he said. “I am the son of Creos Villius, the hieromonk of the One True God.”

“What’s a hieromonk?”

“You have priests?”

“Yes.”

“Then the highest of high priests. There is no man closer to God than my father. Yet it was my father who had me killed.”

He pushed back his hood to reveal sandy hair sticking out through the ties of his mask—ties he worked at with well-practiced hands until the fabric fell away. With his voice muffled he could have been any age, but with the mask hanging around his throat he was no older than me, younger, probably, his smooth skin having seen no weather or hardship.

“Here, look.” He took up a box from the corner and, opening it, held it out to me.

A severed head sat inside. It looked like someone had tried to preserve it, someone who lived in too damp a climate and knew nothing about heads.

“Is that... you?”

It seemed a ridiculous question, but despite the sagging, discoloured flesh, the head in the box looked identical to the man watching me now, owning the same aquiline nose and straight brows.

“Yes, that’s me,” the young man said, seemingly inured to the smell. “As is this.” He jabbed himself in the chest, dimpling his simple grey robe. “My

father ordered my death, but the One True God has a purpose for us all, and he brought me back to see mine done.”

“What did he do with your father?”

“Our god is not a vengeful god, but though my father is forced to show me familial respect in public, I do not trust him or his men not to make another attempt on my life.”

He snapped the box closed.

I jerked my head in the direction of the tents we had been given outside. “Are the men in the grey uniforms his?”

“Clever. Yes. They are called the Blessed Guard and ought to protect me, but I know who they are really loyal to. Andrus as well.” He began to walk slowly around the small tent. “None of them want me here because I make them look bad. My father blesses their war and their bloodshed. He wants to see Kisia destroyed. I refuse to bless their spears and ask instead for God’s mercy on the injured and the displaced.”

“If you don’t like their war and they want you dead, why be here?”

“Because when they stand inside the throne room in Mei’lian, I must be there. I must make it there alive. And that, Rah e’Torin, is why you are here.” He stopped his circuit of the tent floor. “You see, it is a bodyguard I need, one to whom race and religion and birth make no difference, one who carried the severed heads of peasants to give them an honourable end. One who will not be swayed to betray me by any offering of fortune.”

“That was not the selfless act you think,” I said. “Harming the world by retaining souls hurts me just as much. It’s like stabbing yourself in the foot.”

“Even so. I want your protection, Rah. I need someone I can trust, and who better than someone with so little stake in this war that he fails to even understand it.”

Sure that was an insult, I said, “You stepped in just now and saved me and my Swords from total disgrace. I thank you for that, but we fight only to protect the herd. We die only to protect the herd. That is our code. That is our way.”

“Yet you are here fighting Kisians on behalf of Chiltaens.”

“Gideon is. I am just trying to keep my Swords safe.”

“And what will keep them safe? Getting them out of here?”

I met his gaze, his pale eyes kind behind their intensity. “I don’t know,”



I said. “Perhaps nothing will, because even if you win this war, you will not free us.”

“The Chiltaen commanders will not, no. Neither will the Nine. But I would.”

His words sank in. “You would free us? Truly free? Free to take our horses and our swords and go home without being hunted down or forced back?”

“As true a freedom as a body can have.”

“Why?”

He spread his hands in a half shrug. “Because one does not get service without reward. I do not expect you to protect me out of love or duty or honour, not before you know me or understand what I am fighting for, but I can give you what you want most if you give me what I need. And once you have seen me safely to that throne room, you would be free to go. What do you say? Will you serve peace as your herd brother serves war?”

Not all my Swords would agree, even with the promise of freedom. Too many wanted to fight this war, to use the blood of others to heal their own wounds, and I had already let them down too many times.

Yet it was not as though I had a choice.

“You have a deal, Lord—?”

“You may call me Leo when we are alone, but out there I am Dom Villius, or Your Grace.”

“Dom?”

“It is the church’s version of ‘lord’ from the name of God’s first prophet, Domonitius.”

“I see.”

Leo laughed. “You don’t, but perhaps one day you will.”



We set out the next morning in the sort of silence that burns holes in the back of a captain’s neck. None of my Swords were happy with the new arrangement, disliking being separated from the rest of our herd as much as they disliked having to protect a priest. He was little better than a missionary in their eyes, and though I had tried to explain he sought peace,

not war, they saw nothing but an enemy and I couldn't blame them.

It was made even worse the next day when Legate Andrus had us up early to cover more ground. His eyes were constantly turning skyward. The Kisian rains appeared akin to a demon in the Chiltaen minds, but storm clouds had yet to chase us down.

"Do you think we will make it to the city before the rains?" I said as I rode at the priest's side through the afternoon. I had never disliked silence before, but in Leo's company I preferred the sound of his voice to the tension of his overworked mind. When he wasn't talking it was as though he was thinking six things all at once.

"Yes," he said. "God wills it and so it will be, but we will get no farther than the capital until the rains pass and the snow clears."

"Snow?"

He turned, lifting a questioning eyebrow. "You do not get snow upon the plains?"

"Is it a sort of rain?"

"Snow is not rain, though it is wet when it begins to melt. It is cold white fluff that falls from the sky when the world is too cold for water. Winters here also turn water to ice, which is hard like stone. In the deep south, even the wells have been known to freeze if the winter is bad enough."

Jinso was too well-trained to startle at my exclamation. He maintained his even pace behind Dhamara and Ren, both of whom looked back to see what had made me shout. "Solid water," I said. "Can you still drink it?"

"Not while it's solid, but if you put a chunk in your mouth, it will slowly melt. Although you have to be careful not to slice your cheek open."

He laughed at my expression. "You get used to it," he said. "Fortunately, along the Ribbon it rarely snows, but in southern Kisia, winter kills more people than border raids ever have."

Leo talked a lot as we rode, always in Levanti. He told Himi a story about hiding in the gardens of the Citadel of Peace as a child and it taking the servants so long to find him that he fell asleep. He talked to Yitti about herbs and Teppat about history and taught Dhamara a Chiltaen song about a big-breasted woman that he said would probably get him kicked out of the church.

By the time we stopped to make camp on the second afternoon, my

Swords begrudged Leo's existence slightly less. It didn't last long. While new defences took shape and tents went up, the other Levanti rode off to attack a nearby settlement, but as the protectors of Dom Leo Villius, we were left behind. Leo went off to pray, taking only Asim and Ubaid with him, and the rest of us were handed shovels.

I had discovered that an advancing army needed similar things to a herd—water, food, medicinal care, weapons, saddles—and while the Chiltaens added wine and tents and shields, those I could understand. But not latrines. The horses were allowed to shit wherever they wanted, and the Chiltaens had seemed happy for us shit where we slept when chained, but now at every stop they dug latrines. Normally, the Chiltaen slaves did the work, but with half of the army still at Koi, there were not enough of them to do every task.

“Hey! Wait until we're fucking finished!” Juta shouted, as amid laughter, a Chiltaen soldier pulled down his pants at the lip of our pit.

He retorted in Chiltaen, and though some of their words had begun to sound familiar, they still owned no meaning.

“Ignore him,” I said, pausing to wipe sweat from my brow. “Let's just get this done and get out of here.”

Juta snarled at the man. “Foul little runts. Even animals know better than to shit on top of someone, especially when that someone has to watch their back in battle.”

“Juta.”

“Ignoring, Captain,” he said, turning around. The boy's face had reddened with anger as much as with the heat.

“Have you noticed that the female slaves don't even use the latrines?” Himi said, stopping to wipe her own brow. “They piss in pots and don't tip them out until it's dark.”

“What about their female soldiers?” her twin asked.

Himi laughed. “Come on now, Is, don't tell me you haven't noticed. They don't have any.”

“Not any? Can't say I've been spending much time looking at them. I just stay in the pens when I can. They don't look after Zare's hooves properly, and without Orun...”

A moment of silence hung over the half-finished pit, the six of us all digging our shovels in as one. From over in the next pit came one of Yitti's

rare laughs.

“The Korune are like that too,” Lok said, breaking the silence. “I recall an early missionary explaining to Matriarch Ama that women are too weak to wield blades and are needed for bearing children and looking after their husbands.”

“What I would have given to see her face.” Himi grinned. “I mean, Ama of all people.”

“It still warms my blood on cold nights,” Lok said, and amid the laughter the discomfort was forgotten, though Orun never would be.

Bored of us, the Chiltaens wandered off, and once they were out of sight, Juta scooped up their waste with his shovel and flung it up over the side of the pit.

“This is ridiculous,” Istet snapped, throwing down her shovel. “Why is it that every time Rah does something stupid, we have to suffer for it?”

“Is,” Himi hissed. “Don’t.”

“Why not? If he is allowed to speak his mind to the herd master, why can’t I speak my mind to him?”

I sighed, the burn of her anger the harsher for its truth. “I never meant you all to get stuck doing this job with me. Not just this”—I gestured to the pit around us—“but protecting Leo.”

“Like you never meant to lead us right into an ambush and you never meant to get us exiled. But if you had known those things would happen, would you have done any different?”

The sounds from the next pit grew silent as Yitti and the others listened in. Only Rast went on shovelling.

“I did what I believed was right,” I said.

“Shit, you wouldn’t go back and change any of it, would you?” Istet spat on the loose dirt.

“You should be glad of that,” Lok said. “Glad you have a captain who leads with honour. Rah was right to challenge. We shouldn’t be building here. We should be cutting our way out and going home.”

“He wasn’t so keen on going home when it was Eska’s idea.” Himi touched her twin’s arm, but Istet kicked the shovel she had thrown down. “I don’t want to dig a stinking hole in the ground. I don’t want to protect a stupid priest. We’re Swords of the Torin!”

“We are,” I said. “Even stuck down here shovelling dirt, we are still

Swords of the Torin. And we will go on being Swords of the Torin. I don't like being separated from everyone any more than you do, but look at it like this. Leo is like a horse whisperer. If we do a good job protecting him, we might be able to make use of that, and—”

*He will let us go home.*

Leo had promised us freedom, but it had only been freedom for us, not everyone. How many of my Swords would refuse such a bargain if I offered it to them? Yitti certainly, along with any others who had forged ties outside our group and all who believed in Gideon's future. Too many. Better not to give them the choice. Better to say nothing at all. Better to make my own soul heavy in sacrifice to others as Gideon had claimed to be doing.

Istet shook her head. “Fuck you, Rah. I'd challenge you if I thought it would make any difference. Or if I had a death wish. It doesn't seem to matter what you do; the gods still really like you.”

Footsteps approached. Over the edge of the pit the hooded figure of Dom Leo Villius appeared, his shapeless grey gown as inappropriate to the weather as the woven mask covering his face. Asim and Ubaid stood a step behind him. Ubaid grinned down at us.

“Oh shut up, Ubaid,” Istet said. “I'm already hot and angry.”

“Who told you to dig these pits?” Leo said, ignoring the snigger of his guard behind him.

“I don't know who it was,” I said, sticking my shovel into the dirt and leaving it there while I stretched my back. “They were very insistent though.”

“All of you stop. Not another shovelful.” He turned, snapping more words at someone out of sight, this time in Chiltaen. Whoever it was they ran off at speed. “I'm sorry about this,” he said, switching back to his stilted Levanti. “Legate Andrus is a friend of my father's. He doesn't like me being here and would rather I was dead, but he cannot be seen to disrespect me or disobey, so this could be interesting.”

The legate might dislike Leo, but in the few minutes he stood waiting for the man to arrive, more than a dozen Chiltaen soldiers approached the priest on their hands and knees, all but pressing their faces into the dirt at his feet. Leo bent to sit his hand upon each of their heads and utter what sounded like a prayer, and after a long minute of silence, each soldier would rise and thank him. Many did so with tears in their eyes. These the same

men who had shown us only cruelty since we arrived.

“What the fuck is going on?” Himi hissed in my ear. It sounded as though a crowd had gathered just beyond the lip of our pit. Both Asim and Ubaid had their hands upon their swords.

“I told you, to them he’s like what a horse whisperer is to us.”

A raised voice cut across Leo’s blessing of a young soldier, and Legate Andrus appeared, scowling and flushed. Seeing our shovels standing idle in the dirt, he started shouting, but Leo lifted his hand. The legate’s mouth snapped shut.

Smiling beatifically at the legate, Leo gestured to us and spoke. Legate Andrus’s face went from red to purple, but though he kept looking at those gathered to receive Leo’s blessing, the man appeared to be holding his ground. We were to dig the pits.

All at once, Leo sat on the edge of the pit and slid down to join us. Grabbing my shovel, he had thrown out two loads of dirt before any of us moved.

Legate Andrus fumed. His soldiers watched on in horror. Had a horse whisperer been caught hauling on the reins to make their horse walk, we might have owned the same expressions.

Leo kept digging, the bottom of his grey robe touching the dirt. Not sure what else we were meant to do, I picked up Istet’s discarded shovel and dug too.

“Stop this!”

It took me a moment to realise Andrus had spoken in Levanti—only the second time I had ever heard him use our words. But they weren’t for us. He was staring at Leo.

“You have made your point,” he said, taking refuge in Levanti so the watching Chiltaens could not understand him. “Your guards may leave the pit, but you do not have power here. Even while in Koi, your father is the head of the church and the leader of this war, not you. When this land is ours again, you can bless whomever you want, but until then I suggest you keep out of my way.”

He waved a hand, gave an order, and was gone. With grumbles, Chiltaen soldiers climbed down into the pit and snatched the shovels from our hands. Leo was already climbing out, and Istet watched him go, her scowl no lighter for his show of solidarity.



Jinso stood still in his corner of the pen as I rubbed his back and then his haunches—the part he liked best. Every horse had a favourite. I had said so to a Korune merchant once, but he had sneered at me.

“How do you know what he likes? Horses don’t speak, boy.”

He had looked to Masud at my side—big, dependable, honest-looking Masud all the merchants liked to deal with because they had never dived with him. “No, they don’t talk,” Masud had said in the slow way he used when talking to traders. He said they liked bargaining with an idiot.

“They don’t need to,” I had insisted with a child’s stubborn intent on the truth. “But you can tell. You don’t need to talk to tell me you don’t like this...”

I had poked him in his overlarge gut, and he had been about to hit me, only to find his arm caught in Masud’s big hand. “I’m thinking you’ve made your point, little one.” Masud glanced at me as he let the man go. “But don’t go poking the gentleman.”

Gentlemen. They had all been called that. Only later had I understood what it meant and wanted to spit on the word. They were no gentlemen.

Jinso turned his head to nibble at my sleeve. “Sorry,” I said, returning to his rub-down. “I was somewhere very far away.”

We had not fought that day, neither had the other Levanti, but the camp, like the overladen turtle it was, had been picked up and dropped back down with an enormous amount of effort. No slaves went ahead to make fresh camps anymore. Here we travelled as a single body, occasionally throwing out scouts and messengers like fleas from a dog. And at the end of the march, we set up a camp exactly like the one we had just left.

Footsteps approached through the horse pen, but people were always coming and going so I did not look up. Not until they halted behind me. Continuing to rub Jinso’s back, I looked over my shoulder. Gideon stood in the dying sunlight, sweat-stained and with longer hair than I had ever seen him own, its black strands stuck to his forehead.

“Herd Master,” I said when he didn’t speak.

“Not with your new friend, I see.”

I stopped, letting the brush fall like a dead weight at the end of my arm.

“New friend? Leo?”

Gideon’s lips pulled back from his teeth in a sneer. “*Leo*. Using first names with the hieromonk’s son.”

“Why not?” I said, choosing not to remind him how often I had seen him talking and laughing with the Chiltaen commanders. “A hieromonk is nothing to me, therefore he is the same as any other man and requires no greater or lesser respect.”

“Than your own people?”

“What?” His words owned such venom, but I had done nothing to earn his sudden ire. “I am showing my people no disrespect. What do you want, Gideon?”

He folded his arms, making his muscles bulge. “What does Dom Villius want with you?”

“Our protection.”

“He has his own guards for that. And they aren’t just common soldiers.”

“Neither are we common soldiers,” I said, wondering why this was so important it had brought Gideon out here. “And he doesn’t trust his own guards.”

“But he trusts you?”

I folded my arms to mimic him, which only made his scowl deepen. “Why do you care? As I am not part of your herd anymore, I’m no longer your problem.”

“You brought that on yourself.”

“And I would do it again.”

“In truth, you prefer to serve the priest than your own people.”

His undeserved reprimands kept coming like a barrage of punches and I shook my head. “No, of course never that, but there is more honour in protecting the innocent than in slaughtering them. In hoping for peace rather than glorying in war.”

Gideon closed the space between us and drew me into a tight embrace scented with old memories. “Don’t get in my way,” he said, letting go to grip my face between his hands, his eyes boring into mine as he spoke. “Don’t make me kill you. You think I won’t, but I would sacrifice even you to save my people, though it would break my heart.”

He pressed a kiss to my forehead and let me go. “In case this is goodbye.”



Barely had he spoken than he turned away and I could not call after him, could not move, could only listen to his retreating steps and swallow the bile that rose with every sickening thud of my heart.

## Chapter 21

### Miko

By day the palace buzzed with activity, but after the midnight gong it grew furtive. Full of quiet steps and whispers, of flickering lanterns and silhouettes. It was not a place for Princess Miko, but dressed in a maid's robe and sandals, I crept along with my eyes downcast. The ministerial wing was new to me, and in the same breath as I'd asked Ai for her robe, I'd had to ask which room belonged to Minister Manshin. She had answered, but still my heart hammered as I tapped on the doorframe, as afraid I had the wrong room as that I had the right one.

A gentle light bloomed through the paper panes, growing brighter as footsteps neared. The screen slid. Holding his lantern aloft, Minister Manshin glared out at me. His expression didn't soften when he recognised his visitor, but he stepped aside for me to enter and slid the door closed.

Just as the imperial apartments always belonged to the emperor, these rooms always belonged to the minister of the left, commander of Kisia's armies, and as I looked around, I wondered how many battles had been planned within these walls, how many times this room had seen Kisia saved from just such a conquest. Despite its history, it looked much the same as every other room in the palace, though with more scrolls and stacks of paper than I had ever seen outside the archives.

A bag sat upon a lap table, surrounded by rolls of cloth, a writing box, and a flint pouch. "Are you leaving us, Minister?"

“I am under no illusions, Your Highness. If His Majesty is not well enough to do anything but accept Grace Bachita’s plans, I will soon be out of a job. He may be willing to abandon half the empire but I know those generals, I know those men. They will not all obey such a command, and if I can help them fight what is coming, then I will.”

“His Majesty is dead.”

I had practiced excuses and explanations, pleas and apologies, but beneath his stare I could utter none of them. It was all I could do not to look away as my cheeks grew hot.

“When?”

“Since a few hours after you left him that night. I’ve been lying to the council.”

He turned away, beginning to pace back and forth across the matting. I watched him, holding on to all the words I wanted to spill until he was ready to hear them. If he ever would be. He was pragmatic and loyal to the empire, but what I had come to propose was treason.

“The truth changes nothing,” he said after a few laps of the room. “His Majesty’s death still leaves Grace Bachita on the throne as Prin—*Emperor Jie’s* regent.”

“Not if Jie isn’t his heir.”

The minister stopped pacing and pierced me with his hard gaze. “Is he?”

“Yes. I’m sure when Emperor Kin’s will is read, it will state Prince Jie as his heir. But it doesn’t have to.” My heart beat so fast I felt sick. “It could name me.”

“It’s believable,” I said when he made no answer, his stare blank. “In peacetime he would of course give the throne to Jie, but not in war. I have been training longer. I saved his life in Koi. I have proved myself a loyal member of his family. People could be made to believe it; he was always practical about war. And if I was named empress, I would not replace the minister of the left, nor abandon half the empire. I would ride out at the head of the army as he always did and listen to the counsel of those who know more than I do.”

Still he said nothing, seemed not to even hear me, and desperate, I took a step closer, hands clasped. “I can do this. We can do this. We can save Kisia from Bachita’s selfishness as well as from the Chiltaens. You just have to trust me. To help me.”

I needed him to nod, to smile, to speak, something. Anything. Instead he began to pace once more, and I swallowed the bile that burned my tongue. The risk of coming was worth it for an ally, but as he strode back and forth the length of his room, I could imagine all too well the sound of his voice calling for the guards and their hurried footsteps in the passage. I could tell them it was a lie. I could tell them I had caught the minister abandoning his post. I could tell them he had killed the emperor—and I would if it meant surviving. Desperation bred no honour and I did not want to die.

Abruptly the minister stopped before his open bag. “We could forge succession papers.”

The words were as treasonous as mine had been but he did not shy from them; he showed no fear only decision. A little laugh of relief came out on my next breath, but he had resumed pacing and did not seem to hear it. “We could get the emperor’s seal from his rooms,” he said. “And his signature could easily be copied. But we would need Gadokoi too. He has the key to the archival safe.”

“Will he agree?”

“I don’t know. But he will listen. We have been friends in this job a long time and have learnt to trust each other’s judgement, so there is a chance you and I together could sway him. He has never taken sides between Emperor Kin and Empress Hana, but he is devoted to his job and his empire.”

Everything that had seemed so difficult, so impossible, melted away under his competent assurance. I wanted to ask him if he was really sure about this, but I dared not risk him changing his mind. The empire needed me to fight for it and I needed him, so keeping my doubts to myself, I bowed and thanked him. “I will not disappoint you.”

“Ha! That is a promise no one can keep, Your Highness,” he said. “Just assure me that next time the emperor is dead you’ll tell me straight away.”

“Next time the ruler of Kisia is dead, I will not be alive to tell you of it.”

Minister Manshin smiled, an impish look that transformed the stern lines of his face into those of a younger, less careworn man. “Let’s get through this without dying before making such bold claims, Your Highness.”

“As you advise, Your Excellency.”

“I advise you to go see His Majesty in the morning and pick up his seal. Leave the rest to me.”



Dawn was spreading golden fingers across the floor when I went to His Majesty's rooms next morning. I had barely slept, catching mere dozes between each grand imagining and its accompanying fear. We could get caught. Bachita could use the death of Kin against me. Gadokoi could refuse to help. Impossible to turn back now though. It had been for a long time.

“Your Highness?”

Akio had ordered a sleeping mat set up in His Majesty's dressing room, and as he rose from it still dressed in his crumpled robes, he looked to have gotten about as much sleep as I had.

“Good morning, Master Akio. How is your patient this morning?”

I said it for the benefit of the guards outside and any passing servants, but rather than answer, Akio pulled a face and beckoned me into the sleeping room. Emperor Kin lay where I had left him, still dead and starting to smell. The physician took fresh incense sticks from a box and began to light them, one after the other, from a low burning lantern. “We have to tell the court,” he said as he worked. “We can't keep this secret anymore. I am sorry, Your Highness, but my oath is to my patients and to His Majesty, and now Prince Jie is here there is no longer any reason to lie. Kisia will have an Emperor.”

“Yes, you're right,” I said, noting the belligerent set of his jaw. “It cannot be kept secret any longer and should not, but do allow me time to break the news to my poor brother before you inform the ministers.”

Relief escaped him in a rush. “Thank you, Your Highness. I knew you would see it as I did. We only wanted to protect Kisia, but that is no longer necessary.”

“No, Kisia will soon have someone who can fight for her as he did.”

Leaving Akio to his task, I went in search of the imperial seal, one eye on the doorway as I dug through the many writing boxes Emperor Kin had around his room. Fortunately, it was not hard to find. It was a great, carved onyx stamp with a puff of crimson feathers attached to the top with a fine chain. I took it, along with some red wax, and was just tucking them into my sash when one of the guards slid open the main door.

“Ah, Your Highness,” the man said. “Prince Jie is requesting to see His Majesty. Is—?”

The anxious face of the boy who would be emperor peered around him. “Good morning, Brother,” I said, making a show of whispering as I strode to the door. “I am afraid His Majesty is not yet up, and I dare not wake him when all he needs to be fully recovered is more rest.” Not giving him time to reply, I stepped out and bore him with me along the passage. “He was much fatigued by receiving yesterday’s bad news.”

“Oh yes, Uncle Bachi said he didn’t take it at all well. He said he’d never seen His Majesty so afraid and was glad he gave the order to pull back all battalions south of the Tzitzzi River.”

Afraid. It was such a foul lie, tainting Kin’s final moments with words he would never have said and orders he would never have given.

“Do you...” The boy glanced at me as I led the way along the passage, trying to put as much distance between him and his dead father as I could. “Do you think it’s... the right thing to do? Pulling back to the Tzitzzi, I mean.”

“No. All Kisians deserve the protection of their emperor no matter where they live.”

“Oh.” He stopped walking and clasped his hands. “That is what I think too,” he whispered though the guards were too far away to hear us now. “That is what I wanted to say to him, to His Majesty. And also farewell, but... mostly the other thing. I thought maybe he would listen to me because I am his son, but if you have already told him so perhaps he would have ignored me too.”

The truth sat upon my tongue. I could tell him. I could trust him. I could help him stand up to his guardians and do the right thing and Kisia would shift from one Ts’ai emperor to another without a blink. I could even in time hope to become his empress, to sit at his side in the place my mother had occupied, giving legitimacy to the bastard son of a man who had once been no more than a common soldier.

That future was right before me, so close and so easy that I could almost reach out and touch it, but I did not. Could not. I did not want to be a wife. Did not want to be a sister. I had been told what to do all my life, told what to say and what to think, and I had lived in a prison made of people with more power. I did not want to be afraid anymore. I wanted to sit on the

throne of my ancestors and make them proud, wanted to be that Otako keystone holding the empire together.

“Perhaps,” I agreed, the acceptance of my own ambition pulling me taller as we walked on. “Did you say you came to say farewell?”

“Yes. Uncle Bachi says it is too dangerous to stay, that even His Majesty will be heading south as soon as he is a little more recovered. Grandfather says I must be seen, however, must be part of the defence of the empire. So I am to leave this morning with the three battalions heading for the Valley to hold the Zisian Bridge. Father has agreed to let me have command of them. It is quite the honour and I wanted to thank him. Though Uncle Bachi forbade me to go near him. Three ill battalions will do the empire no favours, he said.”

It galled me to be grateful to Grace Bachita about anything, yet... three battalions. I needed Jie to leave, but three battalions could ill be spared, and for a moment doubt held me silent. That easy future was still there, could still be grasped. I pressed my hand to the seal hidden in my sash. “It is an honour. He will be sorry to have missed you, but I am sure you will be at court again soon. Perhaps to receive commendation on your command.”

Jie’s eyes brightened at this. “Yes,” he said. “I want very much to prove myself worthy. I have a lot to live up to as the Soldier Emperor’s son.”

“That you do.” We reached the door to his rooms, where chests that had so recently arrived were being carried out. “I wish you good fortune, Brother. I hope we will see each other again soon.”

With a shy smile, he turned away only to turn right back, making the topknot on his head wobble. “Oh, I am sorry about your mother. I hope—”

“Yes, me too.”

“I don’t know what I would do if anything happened to my mother.”

I had no answer, and with one final smile and a farewell, he went inside and I walked away, putting as much distance between myself and that future as I could.



Prince Jie departed with none of the fanfare that had welcomed him, leaving behind half his luggage and Grace Bachita, who was busily giving orders

for the deployment of the army south of the river as though he had been the minister of the left himself. With all the orders Minister Manshin had to ratify and the bustle of Jie's departure, it wasn't until midday that both Minister Manshin and Minister Gadokoi joined me in my rooms.

They arrived together, and though there had been time enough to compose myself, to prepare, my heart raced such that not even the deepest of breaths could calm it. One look at their grim faces and I wished I could call Jie back. This was madness. Treason. It was one thing to dream of a future ruling Kisia with Tanaka, another entirely to pull power from beneath the feet of Kin's heir. For a mad instant I hunted escape, but there was only one door—the door they blocked as they bowed.

"Your Highness," they both said.

"Excellencies," I returned, my tongue taking part in the dance of court protocol even as I panicked. "Do join me."

My well-trained hand gestured to the table and they knelt, one upon either side like jailors penning me in. I could produce no further words of welcome, and while they made themselves comfortable, I signalled the waiting servant to bring our food. She returned with a long lacquer tray and began to serve our meal with more grace than I could ever have achieved.

Although most men of the court made sport of watching the serving girls about their work, both ministers stilled to statues as she shuffled across the matting. They did not even look at one another over the table, and I wondered then how much Gadokoi already knew.

The girl's departure brought them back to life and Gadokoi reached for a sliver of fish. Then a pickled plum. Then a swan's liver. Manshin gnawed his lip instead of food. "Grace Bachita has sent orders to the rest of the battalions," he said at last. "They'll all be gone in the morning."

"I know," Minister Gadokoi returned mildly, as though continuing a conversation they had started elsewhere. He pushed his glasses up his nose. "Is he really dead, Your Highness?"

I thought of the still body and the smell and nodded. "Very."

"It is a great pity. It was always coming, of course, he wasn't getting any younger, but one likes such things to be a bit more neat."

The minister of the right took some more fish. Manshin growled. "I *have* informed Shiyo of what we are here to discuss, but it is hard to interest him in anything when food or coin is present."



“Excuse me if I am not as fast to leap at treason as you are, Ryo.”

Until my return to Mei’lian, Minister Manshin and Minister Gadokoi had been but distant features in my life, men who bowed when I passed but whose positions saw them feared and respected by all lesser members of the court. While Minister Manshin had once been a general like his father before him, Gadokoi had risen through the administrative ranks year after year, before stepping in to the highest office upon the death of Minister Zi. He had led the unexciting life of a court administrator, and when he found me staring at him across the table, he let out a sigh. “Your Highness, do excuse me for speaking plainly. I do not agree with Grace Bachita’s decision. I do not think it is what His Majesty would have wanted were he still alive. Yet I am nothing but a servant of the empire, not its keeper; it is not for me to make such decisions. To usurp Emperor Kin’s chosen heir would be to steal the birthright of—”

“Like Emperor Kin stole my father’s? My mother’s? My grandfather’s? What wrong had any of them done but be in his way? No, do not list all the things Katashi Otako did to harm Kisia and her people. He attacked her cities and burned her people, I know, as I know I ought not be proud to be his daughter. But I am—not of him but of his name, of the great line of emperors who stood behind him and now stand behind me all the way back to Ghai Otako, who brought us here all those years ago and carved out a future for his people that none of them thought they could ever have. Do not think of me as the daughter of Katashi Otako but as the descendant of the man who built this empire, who took care of his people when they came, lost and alone, across the sea in search of a better life. I want only what is best for my people, and I will not sit by and let a man who cares nothing for Kisia abandon half the empire to protect his own interests. I would rather fight, but if I am to do so, I will need your help, Minister.”

My heart thrummed with the passion of my words long after I ceased speaking them, but Minister Gadokoi just stared at me. Then with something half like a twitch and half like a smile, he nodded at Minister Manshin. “You were right, she is good at this.”

Manshin’s grin made a fleeting return. “Isn’t she, though? I told you she could talk the hieromonk himself into retreating in shame.”

“It isn’t right, though, Ryo. By the very laws of the empire it isn’t right. Prince Jie might yet turn out to be as passionate and just and—”

“But it isn’t the prince we’re dealing with and it won’t be until he comes of age, assuming his uncle even lets him get that old.”

“Ryo!”

“Oh, don’t sound so shocked. You’ve been at court long enough that nothing should shock you anymore.”

“I may not agree with his plans, but I do not believe Grace Bachita would knowingly act in a way so—”

“He knows Emperor Kin is dead,” I said. “He chose not to say anything so he could pressure me into marrying him, thereby giving him a stronger claim to the throne than Jie.”

They both stared at me, Minister Gadokoi frozen with a pickled plum halfway to his lips. “How sordid,” he said when he thawed. “I retract my statement, but the law is still the law.”

I had wrapped the wax and the imperial seal in a strip of linen and, taking the bundle from my sash, slid it across the table to him. “What Grace Bachita intends is against the law, too. It will also end with thousands of people dying needlessly. I hope you will reconsider. The council must be told of Emperor Kin’s death today and we are running out of time.”



Within the hour a messenger brought more bad news. Suway had fallen, and General Jikuko and what was left of his battalions had been forced to retreat. He begged for more reinforcements, and if we were going to make a stand at Risian, we had to leave now.

There ought to have been more time. In every other war, the Chiltaens had attacked the western valleys that produced our food, or the eastern cities and ports that brought in much of Kisia’s wealth, but this invading force moved fast and fought like a fury, with only one goal in mind. The destruction of the imperial family and its seat of power. As fast as possible.

I found the council gathered in the hallway outside Emperor Kin’s apartments. In addition to Ministers Manshin and Gadokoi, and Governor Dohk, there was General Kitado, commander of the Imperial Guard; Commander Bo of the city guard; old General Varen of Mei’lian’s standing battalion; and the even older General Yi of the tenth military province. And

Grace Bachita, despite having no official position on the council.

Commander Bo set his hands on his hips as I approached. “But I agree with His Grace,” he said. “The advance of the Chiltaen army is unprecedented. The only sensible plan is to pull back to our most defensible position, and that is, and always has been, the Tzitzzi River.”

“That is a lot of land and a lot of people to abandon, Commander,” said old General Yi, the wrinkles etched so deep upon his forehead that he appeared to always be frowning. But the man had aged like hard oak and stood more upright than many a younger one. “Northern people are as much Kisian as those south of the river.”

“Do not try to make this political,” Commander Bo said. “This is not about Otakos and Ts’ais but about the safety of the part of our empire we *can* protect.”

“The safety of *your* city and *your* command?”

General Varen broke over Commander Bo’s snarl by clearing his throat. He and General Yi were the oldest present and the only two who had served through my father’s rebellion. “If we learnt anything seventeen years ago,” Varen said when he had their attention. “It was that if someone wants to cross the river badly enough, there is nothing we can do to stop them. Shimai is weak. There are old tunnels. We have tried to block them all, but...” The old man shrugged. “Defence is the last resort when there is nothing left to do but cower behind the walls of the few cities we have left.” He paused, no doubt giving time for everyone to remember what happened to Koi. “But dead Chiltaens cannot take our pride and our honour, and if we meet them in battle, they will die.”

“Have you heard how the Levanti fight?” Grace Bachita said, turning his scowl on the old General. “Yes, they are savages, but we must respect their abilities. Every report says they have decimated our armies in the field.”

“Then we will have to be smarter.”

“No.” Bachita turned his gaze around the gathered group. “This is not a matter up for discussion. His Majesty has ordered us to retreat behind the safety of the river. All there is left to decide is—”

I ought to have walked away. To have waited for Gadokoi’s decision. But I could not be silent, could not let them order the last of the retreat and abandon so many people. I stepped into their circle and pulled in a breath as though the air contained courage. “His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Kin

Ts'ai, has ordered no retreat. He is dead."

They stared at me, every man seeming to freeze as they forgot their planned words and shaped new ones. "He's what?" Commander Bo said.

"I said there was something wrong with this." Dohk punched his fist into his palm. "It has been a farce from the beginning."

"I do not understand."

"How?"

"When?"

I held up my hands for quiet, but though I did not get it, I lifted my voice over their denunciations. "He died of his wounds the day we arrived. Master Akio acted on my instructions to keep it a secret—no wait, listen, please. If it had become common knowledge that Emperor Kin was dead, what hope would the people of Kisia have had with war looming? I lied for the sake of the empire."

"And we are supposed to believe that?" Bachita scoffed.

I turned on him. "His Grace also knew but has been using this knowledge to force me to agree to his every decision in the emperor's name, including this retreat. But I will lie no longer. His Majesty is dead but he would not want us to retreat. He would *never* abandon half of his empire to the Chiltaens, Levanti riders or no."

Some murmurs of agreement met the murmurs of disbelief, and it was General Kitado who moved toward the door of His Majesty's rooms. The others followed and I stayed in the passage while the council filed inside to see the truth for themselves. I tried not to hear their muffled exclamations and their words of horror, tried to focus on what I needed to say, but all sensible thought seemed to have abandoned me.

The council returned subdued, Dohk paler than I had ever seen him. Perhaps it had been the sight of the body, or perhaps the realisation that the Soldier Emperor was gone and could not get us out of this mess.

Taking advantage of the silence, Grace Bachita said, "The people must be informed of their emperor's passing and the ascendance of Emperor Jie Ts'ai. Word should be sent to every town and city so they can mourn the loss of Kisia's finest emperor.

"Orders will also go out to every battalion," he went on, lifting them with a tide of confident oratory. "Every general is to pull back south of the Tzitzu River and swear allegiance to the new Emperor."

“No,” I said. “You cannot do that.”

“Cannot?” He spun back to me, eyes flashing. “And why not, little girl? His Majesty is dead. Prince Jie is emperor now, and as his regent—”

“No heir was ever named.” The calm words belied the churning fear inside me. “No heir was ever officially recognised.”

Grace Bachita’s mouth snapped closed. His brows drew so close they almost touched. “And who else could possibly be his heir but his son?”

“Me.”

“You?” He jutted his face so close to mine I could see every pore upon his nose. “You are a monstrous bastard foisted upon the great Emperor Kin by his whore of a wife. You are no heir.”

“Your Grace!” Minister Gadokoi stepped forward. “Such vitriol is unbecoming in any members of His Majesty’s war council. As disappointed as I am that Her Highness did not entrust us with this information sooner, I agree with her that making it widely known Emperor Kin is dead would not be wise under the current circumstances. As for who is His Majesty’s heir, that question can easily be settled. His will is lodged in the archival safe.”

“Then fetch it. At once.”

Minister Gadokoi made a prim little bow. “Your Grace.”

He walked away along the passage leaving stiff silence in his wake. This was it. This was the moment. Soon I would fly or fall, and if I fell, I would have no future but as the wife of this man, this man I would rather strangle than lie with. Another option, perhaps, for when all others ran out. I laughed at myself, a giddy sound that made the members of Kin’s war council stare at me.

“You must be very distressed by the news from Koi, Your Highness,” Minister Manshin said, stepping into the widening chasm of silence. “This has not been an easy time for any of us. I must say I agree with Minister Gadokoi,” he added, speaking to the rest of the council. “The people of Kisia have long felt protected by the strength of Emperor Kin, and to inform them, and our enemies, of his loss would only further sap morale.”

The two old generals agreed, but Grace Bachita shook his head. “Morale that will be renewed when they have a new, vigorous emperor on the throne.”

“Whatever can you mean? I have great respect for Prince Jie, but though I hope he will grow into the position, he cannot yet be called an awe-

inspiring and vigorous man.”

The minister of the left met Grace Bachita’s scowl with nothing but curious interest.

“Yes, indeed,” General Yi agreed. “He is a child. Is he even capable of leading a battle? Has he been trained to use any weapons? Or even to ride?”

“He will not, of course, be the one leading us through this crisis,” Bachita said. “I will sit on the throne as his regent until this war has passed. As you said, we don’t need a boy, we need a *man*.”

His sidelong look at me was all sneer, but there was no outcry, no complaint, only nods as though nothing could be more natural or expected than Grace Bachita’s elevation to the throne. So long had they all assumed him Kin’s heir that Jie was no sooner out of sight than out of mind. Of more importance was deciding whether the general populace ought to be informed of Emperor Kin’s passing.

While they went on arguing, I awaited Gadokoi’s return. It seemed to take hours, though it could not have been more than fifteen minutes before he reappeared at the end of the passage, the presence of a ceramic tube in his hands silencing all conversation. It was an ornately carved and decorated tube, covered in Ts’ai dragons that chased one another through a sun-filled sky, but no sooner had he held it out for all to see than he cast it onto the floor. It smashed and shards of pottery skittered around our feet, and from the largest surviving chunk, a scroll fell out. Sealed with gleaming red wax pressed with the imperial seal.

Minister Gadokoi bent to pick it up as though it were a precious child, holding it reverently as he straightened and pushed his glasses back up his nose. The wax seal cracked and he unrolled the parchment.

“Well? What does it say, man?” Governor Dohk demanded. “Don’t keep us in such suspense.”

My heart fluttered like a butterfly inside my chest. It was madness to even hope, madness to—

The minister cleared his throat. “It says: ‘I, Emperor Kin Ts’ai, first of my name, hereby present to the empire my daughter and heir, Empress Miko Ts’ai, first of her name. With the blessing of the gods may she take her oath and rule wisely for the good of Kisia and all her people.’”

Tears that I could not stop burst to my eyes and I sucked a shaky breath, letting it go in a huff of deepest relief. Empress. Empress Miko Ts’ai. He

had done it. He had believed in me and it was real, read to these men at this time and unable to be undone. Minister Gadokoi smiled as he held out the scroll to me. “Long live Empress Miko.”

Grace Bachita snatched the will out of his hand. “No. No. I see what you are doing, don’t think I can’t see it. You’re in league with her. What did she offer you to make this false document?”

“Now see here,” General Vareen exclaimed. “That is Minister Gadokoi you are accusing, not some petty secretary.”

“My cousin would have given the empire to Chiltae rather than to an Otako. And you can forget about claiming the Ts’ai name, girl, because we all know the truth. You and that twin brother of yours were Katashi Otako’s bastards and ought to have died with him. The Otakos are a foul sickness that ought to be cleansed entirely from—”

“How dare you?” I said. “The Otakos built this empire. They built everything in which you stand and everything of which you claim to be proud. Whatever wrongs my father committed cannot be erased or forgiven, but the poor choices of one man do not tarnish a whole line of emperors, every one of whom had more grace and honour in the tips of their noses than you have in your whole selfish body.”

I had gone too far and knew it. He lifted his hand as though to strike me, but clenched it into a fist. “Guards!”

Imperial guards were never far, and no sooner had the word left his lips than footsteps hurried along the passage. “Arrest Princess Miko. She is charged with concealing the death of His Imperial Majesty and forging a will naming herself the successor to the Crimson Throne. Along with Minister Gadokoi, who is the only one who could have assisted her.”

Hands gripped my arms. Outcry rose around me, but though I expected Minister Manshin to order the guards to stand down, he said not a word. The imperial guards were the only soldiers in the empire he had no right to command.

“His Excellency would never—”

“I did not forge any documents, this is an outrage and—”

“What would Gadokoi possibly have to gain from such treason?”

“Enough!” Bachita roared. “Prince Jie is the only blood son of Emperor Kin and is therefore his heir. No false document can change that. General Kitado, have them both taken away until I can decide upon a suitable

punishment.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Grips tightened on my arms, and as I was led away, Grace Bachita’s face lit with furious triumph.



From my room in the inner palace, I heard the death drums roll, the whole city coming alive with a combination of grief and joy that marked the passing of an Emperor and the crowning of his heir.

Ai spent the afternoon packing for my departure to Ts’ai. Chancellor Goro had come to explain the council’s decision—absolution and marriage—and though he seemed not to blame me for my falsity, he had no kind words. “You must bow and give allegiance to His Majesty’s regent with everyone else this evening.” He stood in the door, as hesitant about departing as he had been about arriving.

He left when I made no response. And then and only then, when we were entirely alone, did I send Ai on one last mission. She had screwed up her nose in distaste and confusion but had nodded and bowed and asserted that she would do whatever I asked. And once she had gone, I began to dress.

The dress code was strict for an audience with the emperor or his regent. Robes had to be full length, even in summer, and only the outer robe could be ornate. Wooden sandals were mandatory for all members of the court, and even servants who attended the emperor had to change into a pair upon arrival so they could not mask the sound of their footsteps.

Upon such occasions, Mama had always dressed me in gold, hoping such shimmering elegance would draw attention from my lacking figure and square jaw, but there would be no golden robe this time. I pulled on breeches and a tunic, leathers, mail, and an imperial surcoat—the uniform of a general I had been given to wear at Jikuko’s camp. With my hair pulled tight into a simple topknot, I looked more soldier than princess, and I smiled at my reflection for the first time in many years.

When Ai returned from her final mission, she gasped. “Your Highness, you cannot go to the throne room dressed like a man. The chancellor will



have me whipped for allowing such a thing.”

“No, he won’t. Just tell him I sent you away and would not let you dress me. Did you get it?”

Shrinking back, she held out the blackened bow the imperial guards had removed from my room, unstrung and misshapen. I took it, my heart exulting at its touch. Such anger flowed through its limbs. Such strength. Such power.

Under Ai’s fretful gaze, I strung it, then took the quiver she held hidden beneath a soiled robe. No sword at my waist, no hidden daggers, just my father’s bow, slipped into a sheath upon my back.

“Now,” I said, glancing at myself one last time in the mirror. “I am ready.”

“Is there anything else you require, Your Highness?”

“No, Ai, stay and unpack my robes. I am not going to Ts’ai.”

She bowed, expressionless, and I wondered if she knew what I meant to do. When she bowed as deeply as she could, I was sure of it.

Whatever she might think of my plans, she had done her tasks well. At the appointed time, a pair of guards came to escort me to the throne room, but they wore no imperial surcoats. No sashes of the Imperial Guard. These men were soldiers. Manshin’s soldiers. They looked me up and down, from my topknot to the sash I had tied the right way this time, before resting upon Hacho.

“The bow,” one said, holding out his hand. “It would be better if I carry it.”

I handed it over with the quiver, my heart hammering.

News of the emperor’s death had brought the palace to life and the inner sanctum bustled like its old self. Lords and ladies and wealthy merchants had come from all over the city to swear allegiance to the new emperor through his regent, and through the press of silk and jewels and cloying scents we wove, drawing every eye.

“Your Highness!” Chancellor Goro exclaimed as we approached the open throne room doors. “You cannot go in there dressed like that!”

“I can and will,” I said, my guards continuing on without so much as slowing. With every step toward the great doors, my heartbeat sped. For there at the far end of the enormous room he sat, enthroned before the masses. Guards lined both walls, tense and watchful, but only a pair

maintained the empty space between the Humble Stone and Kisia's new emperor-regent upon the Crimson Throne.

"Your Highness!" the Chancellor said again, his voice fading as he fell back, or perhaps it was merely drowned by the thump of my heart.

My two guards pushed their way through the throng, not stopping until we reached the Humble Stone. There Minister Gadokoi, also hedged by soldiers, had just risen from a bow. Upon the throne, Grace Bachita leered at me. "Very affecting, little—"

"Silence," I said, and my voice rang to the high rafters. "Emperor Kin named me his heir. Step down now."

All humour drained from his face. "How dare you—"

"No, how dare you arrest Minister Gadokoi, the most loyal and conscientious servant the empire has ever had, merely because you could not accept the truth. Step. Down."

Silence was spreading and his gaze flittered around the packed room, then to the guards who had brought me here. "The princess is mad. Take her away."

Neither man moved. The room was beginning to hum. "Grace Bachita Ts'ai," I said, raising my voice to echo around the room. "In payment for the crime of falsely accusing an innocent man and for challenging the right of Emperor Kin's appointed heir, the gods' representative upon the Crimson Throne, you are sentenced to death."

I took my father's bow from the soldier's hand and nocked an arrow to her string.

Someone screamed, but I kept my gaze upon the new emperor-regent, dressed in the imperial robes as though he were no regent at all.

More screams rang. Space opened around me. The creak of the string drawing past my ear was the most beautiful music, but when the arrow flew it went on silent wings. He had no time to move. No time to do more than widen his eyes in fear, kindly enlarging my target. His head slammed against the throne as the arrow pierced his eye and came out the back of his skull, pinning him to the crimson lacquer.

The two soldiers who had played escort stayed with me as I mounted the dais, and there amid the silence of a hundred and more watching eyes, I came face to face with my enemy. Gripping what was visible of the shaft, I yanked the arrow free, sending blood and brains flicking onto the wooden

floor. Bachita's body slumped. With two hands, I gripped the back of his robe and lifted his dead weight just enough to heave him off the throne. He tumbled head first onto the floor, his skull cracking like an egg so the remains of his brain could ooze out.

Adjusting my surcoat, I sat, leaving my father's bow to tower above my head as it once must have towered above his. Except I was not his son. I was his daughter.

"I am Empress Miko Ts'ai." My words rang to the thick beams that crossed the ceiling, for this was a play now, theatre that these men and women would tell their children, and their children's children, until history didn't need to recall my name for it was etched in the hearts and minds of all. "Emperor Kin named me his heir, but I am also the granddaughter of Emperor Lan and descendent of the great Lord Ghai Otako, and I will not run when enemies march to our gates. I will ride out and meet them on the field of battle and show them what Kisians do to those who think they can take our land."

Bowing before me, Minister Gadokoi lifted his voice. "Long live Empress Miko, chosen heir of Emperor Kin Ts'ai."

The soldiers who had walked with me bowed first. Some members of the court followed. Then servants and their lords and ladies, until a cry of "Long live Empress Miko!" resounded through the hall, and from where he stood at the side of the room, Minister Manshin nodded, a grim smile compressing his lips.

We would ride for Risian.

## Chapter 22

### Cassandra

My cell was cold. It was dark. And it stank. But there was no getting out of it, so I sat wedged in the corner, wrists chained. At length, the dregs of the night passed, leaving daylight to eke its way in through a high grating, the sun rising upon Chiltaen-held Koi the same as it had always done upon a Koi held by Kisians.

Out in the city, She had stripped off the dead commander's clothes and donned a common robe. It had stopped the Chiltaens from trying to kill an already dead man, but it had not stopped the body from beginning to rot.

Pain twisted my every limb and I leant my head back against the wall.

With my eyes closed I could see the inside of a teahouse, ghostly and dreamlike. I had been able to see it for the last few hours, She unwilling, or unable, to move from the table where She knelt. Tea came. Tea was drunk. Tea was taken away. The commander must have had some coin on him because She hadn't been thrown out yet.

Every now and then She turned, stiff, slow, to look out toward the gates. They stood open, the city going on about its business as though no change of leadership had taken place. Except there were Chiltaen soldiers everywhere. They hovered around the gate in groups, harrying all who tried to pass in and out. Checking sacks and saddlebags and wagons and demanding bribes.

She turned back to Her tea.

While I fell in and out of sleep, I watched the tea bowl in my dream world lift and be set back down, be filled again and eventually taken away. She kept turning to look at the gates and testing the movement in Her legs. Around Her patrons came and went, and though I could hear their chatter, I could catch none of Her thoughts.

In the hazy way of someone half awake, I wondered how long they planned to keep me locked up. I had done the job the hieromonk had wanted, Leo's dead body proof enough even without his head. The hieromonk had listened to my blathering story without so much as a flicker of surprise, only annoyance and, for the briefest of moments, fear. The most powerful man in Chiltae had looked over his shoulder, into every shadow, as though expecting to see ghosts.

She was watching the gates again. Tapping the table. Counting under Her breath. Sixteen guards was a lot of guards.

She opened and closed Her fingers. The little one didn't move at all, not even when She gripped the handle of a dagger. A girl brought a fresh bowl of tea.

"Here you are, my lord," she said, bowing as she set it before him. "Is there anything else I can get for you?"

She focussed on the woman's throat. She adjusted her grip on the dagger. Caught in my own body far away, I could do nothing but watch, nothing but beg Her not to do what was surely in Her mind.

Perhaps with a fresh body She could escape. Could be free.

"My lord?"

"No, nothing," She rasped out.

The serving girl risked a look up at her patron and paled. She scurried away without another word.

The bell over the door chimed and a pair of Chiltaen soldiers entered the teahouse, silence spreading before their jeering smiles. There were no free tables. This only widened their grins. One of them pointed at a pair of old men engrossed in a game of Errant. "That's our table," he said. "Get out."

A few patrons leant out to see what was going on, though most stared at their tea rather than at the men. "We were here first," the closest of the elders said, not looking up. He moved a piece on the board, causing his companion to click his tongue and shake his head.

Ignored, the soldier lunged and hauled the man up by his robe, sending

Errant pieces rolling. A tea bowl smashed on the floor.

“Are you talking back to me, old man? This is our city now. You’d better learn to do what you’re told.”

“In Kisia, we listen to our elders,” came the strangled reply, and the soldier’s grip tightened. Still at Her table, She squeezed the dagger hilt. She could do something. She could step in. It wasn’t like they could hurt the commander’s corpse.

But just as I was sure She was about to move, She didn’t. She looked down at Her tea.

Gasps. A crash of wood. The tinkle of more ceramic breaking and then being crushed underfoot. A woman screamed and something heavy hit the floor.

She went on staring at the ripples in her tea until they stilled. When again She looked up, the two Chiltaen soldiers were settling themselves at the table. No one was looking at them, or at the body on the floor. I could hear no death song, but with a last half breath and a sigh, the fierce fire of the old man extinguished upon the wooden boards.

“Hey! Is someone going to bring us a drink?”

Slowly, life returned to the teahouse upon a rising tide of whispered words and shuffling steps. On the floor the body went unheeded.

As fast as Her stiffening body could move, She got up, and kneeling beside the old man, She touched his still-warm cheek.

Nothing.

She tried his forehead. His hand. Panic mounted as She pressed first Her whole palm and then Her face to his skin, but nothing changed.

“No,” She hissed. “No. I need it, let me have it.”

“Hey! What are you doing?” One of the soldiers laughed as She pressed Her lips to the wispy hair at the man’s temples.

Still nothing.

“No!” She shouted, bringing rigid fists down upon his chest. “No! I need it!”

“Hey!” A hand hauled her up, but She tore from its grip and lurched for the door. “Hey!”

Outside, the city hung with smoke haze. Noise hammered in from everywhere. She ran, but Her feet seemed to be one step behind Her, and She stumbled like a drunk. The gates were there, right there, but every

guard in the bloodstained square watched Her approach. Watched Her fall face first onto the stones.

*Hey! You!* I shouted, trying to reach Her through the madness. *Hey, you! It's me!* A bubble of laughter broke my lips. How much easier if I had given Her a name. *She! Her! Annoying bitch! Don't do it, don't leave. You need to come back, you need to—*

“Hey, Captain, I think this might be the one you’re looking for.”

A face swam before my closed eyes. A familiar face with its thick brows and its cheek criss-crossed with tiny scars.

*Captain Aeneas! Yes! It's me, Cassandra. Not me, but—oh, fuck this, just don't let Her leave!*

Fingers were pressed to Her forehead. The sash around Her throat lifted, its fabric sticking to the congealed blood. “I think you might be right. It’s about time, too. His Holiness has been raging all afternoon. Take him to the castle.”

“No!” cried the commander’s crackling voice. “No. No, please just let me out, I need to get out of the city, I want—”

“Dead people aren’t supposed to walk or talk. They don’t want anything either. You’re going to the castle.”

“No! No!”

I could not watch Her fight them, did not want to hear Her desperate screams and Her pleas. Would it really have been better to stay trapped in a dead skin out there than to come back to me?

“It was worth a try,” She said with a bitter laugh when at last the cell door opened and She was thrown inside, falling to her knees before me. “I know you were watching. Don’t look all hurt; you’d have done the same thing in my position.”

In the doorway the hieromonk cleared his throat. “Aren’t you going to... take her back now, Miss Marius? Oh, don’t look so shocked. I’ve suspected what you are since I heard about Jonus and now I know for sure.” He pressed his hands together, the picture of serene piety. “The Witchdoctor will pay very well for you indeed.”

## Chapter 23

### Miko

It was no glorious procession, rather a tiring march through the day and into the night. There was no rest, little to eat or drink, and when we arrived at Risian, no fortified camp had been prepared, as the northern battalions had lost most of their baggage trains. A few large tents were scrounged up for the generals and myself, but after so long in the saddle, I was satisfied with the lumpy sleeping mat, the murky water with which to wash my face, and a common soldier's rations.

"I am not here to eat like an empress and sleep in a palace," I told the apologetic boy who brought my meal. "I came to fight for my people."

"Yes, Your Majesty. Thank you, Your Majesty," he had said as he backed out, bowing.

The thrill of being called "Your Majesty" had not yet worn off, nor had being greeted as Empress Miko by my generals. They were waiting for me in the largest of the tents, where Minister Manshin had laid out a map and was populating it with Errant pieces as though we were embarking on the largest game ever played.

"My apologies, Your Majesty," he said. "In our haste we forgot to bring the battalion markers, but a few of the soldiers had Errant sets in their packs."

I thought of Emperor Kin with his Errant board on the arm of the throne, moving pieces and dispensing wisdom in the darkness. *Do not dither at the*



*opening. Know their weakness. Never beg forgiveness. An emperor serves his people; the day the people serve the emperor is the day the empire falls.*

I shivered at the memory. But whatever the Chiltaens threw at us, today was not the day the empire would fall.

“Everything all right, Your Majesty?”

I had been staring at the board and looked up into Manshin’s lined face. “Yes, Excellency, merely lost a moment in thought. Tell me where we stand.”

The map lay on a table, and around it knelt eight men and me. Minister Manshin, along with General Kitado of the Imperial Guard; Generals Jikuko, Shoki, and Rosoki representing the northern battalions who had been fighting this conquering force since they arrived; and Generals Baro, Wo, and Taranada representing the southern battalions fresh to the fight. Whatever their thoughts on following an empress, they respected Minister Manshin.

“The Chiltaen force is mostly made up of foot soldiers,” he said, pointing at a little group of Errant pieces on the map. “These are the Chiltaens we are used to, the ones our soldiers are trained to fight. They also have a cavalry detachment—” Again he pointed, this time to an Errant piece sitting to the side of the mass. “Their legate, Andrus, rides with them. They too are nothing new, we are used to fighting them. But these”—He pointed to a pair of Errant pieces off to the side—“are the Levanti. They ride, but they are not the same as the equivalent number of mounted Chiltaens.”

“Each of them stands a head taller than any of us,” General Jikuko said, his already worn face seeming to have aged considerably since I saw him last. “Their horses are the same. Enormous animals. And they ride with a skill I have never seen, able to wield two blades or loose accurate arrows while their animals are moving. Not just moving but turning and dodging through the battle.” He let out an explosive exhale and stared at nothing. “What else? They don’t seem to have their own clear battle tactics beyond what the Chiltaens tell them to do. They just attack at speed and rip through your weakest point first. They seem to fight in pairs or threes—it’s rare to get them alone, but when you do, it doesn’t make them any easier to kill.”

“They can take an arrow in the arm and just keep going,” General Shoki said, and Jikuko nodded along. “It’s their fearlessness that makes them

dangerous. They don't... think before they act. Don't doubt. They just fight."

"But they are *real* men?" I said. "They can die?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. Real flesh and blood men. And women. They can die the same as we do. Although whenever we've been able to return to battlefields, we've found the bodies of their dead without heads."

There was something almost apologetic in the young general's grimace.

"Without heads?" General Taranada said. He hadn't yet shed his annoyance over the sudden change of plans that had seen him marching his battalion north to Risian instead of east along the river. "What do you mean without heads? They fall off? Disappear?"

"We think the other Levanti take them. They are certainly removed with a blade and it's not something we've ever seen the Chiltaens do."

General Wo, as annoyed as General Taranada but better at hiding it behind his mild smile, said, "But why?"

"We don't know," Jikuko said. "A local custom perhaps. They are not from these shores but from the plains northeast of Parvum, across the Eye Sea."

Taranada laughed. "Reaching a long way for allies now, aren't they?"

"It's not the first time the Chiltaens have hired mercenaries to fight their battles," Minister Manshin said. "It's not even the first time they've had this many, but our soldiers don't train to fight warriors like these." He looked along the table at me. "This, I think, is why we are struggling to push them back. The Chiltaens have a strong plan, have clearly been planning this for some time, but had they fielded more of their own soldiers instead of the Levanti, or even the equivalent number of those heavily armoured swordsmen from the west, they wouldn't have gotten as far as they have so fast. We don't know how to fight fearless warriors who have no clear tactics."

His words made my insides squirm with fresh anxiety. It had been such a battle to even get here that I had hardly thought of what would happen once we were. The possibility that we could lose had not crossed my mind.

Having left us a moment to digest his grim pronouncement, Minister Manshin went on. "If we are going to win this battle, we are going to have to use their lack of tactics against them," he said, beginning to move the little Errant pieces around on the map. "We are going to have to lure them

into a trap they can't see."

"Andrus is no idiot," General Rosoki said, leaning forward to take part in the conversation for the first time. A fresh wound wept into the hair above his ear. "He will be expecting us to lure them into an ambush of sorts; that was always a favourite tactic of Emperor Kin."

"I don't mean that sort of trap."

He spent the next hour shifting the Errant pieces around on the map. Each of the generals voiced their opinions and moved them some more. Discussion ranged from the probable way the Chiltaens would field their army to the exact incline of specific hills in the area, and through it all I could do nothing but listen and watch and feel inadequate.

These men had spent their lives in the standing battalions of the Rising Army, had fought numerous battles and skirmishes against the Chiltaens and the mountain tribes and even occasionally their own people. My tutors had been good and I had applied myself to learning all there was to learn with an energy Tanaka had lacked, but all the studied knowledge in the world was nothing to the experience that surrounded me. Yet by the time the generals rose from the table, a glow of pride infused me and I knew we could do this. Minister Manshin, however, could not manage so much as a smile.

"You look troubled," I said, lingering once the others had departed.

"I am troubled, Majesty."

"You don't believe in our strategy? I know they say these Levanti are fearless and frightening, but our plan is good and our soldiers are strong."

He sighed. "It is and they are, but I would feel much more confident with greater numbers. I wish very much that the eastern battalions were here, or that Prince Jie had not departed the capital with those three battalions. We need them."

"Messengers were sent out. There is a chance both could still arrive in time."

The look he gave me shrank some of my assurance. I felt like a child again. "Lord Oyamada will say you have stolen his grandson's throne and is more likely to use those soldiers to fight against you rather than for you and —"

"But this is Kisia we are fighting for, he would not..." I stopped, hearing my own words.

“Rare is the man who thinks like that, Your Majesty. Most people do not fight for something because it is right. Grace Bahain is a prime example. If he cared about Kisia, we would have heard from him or his generals before now. That there has been nothing troubles me greatly.”

Emperor Kin had bade me write to Edo, had said I needed to remind Grace Bahain that he had once been loyal to the empire, but until now I had not considered the full implication of those words. That Grace Bahain was no longer loyal to the empire at all.



A light summer mist paled the high ground around Risian the following morning. We had departed our makeshift camp in the predawn light, Minister Manshin insistent that if we were to win, we would need to choose the terrain ourselves and be prepared before the Chiltaens arrived, even if it meant having to wait.

There was no sign of them when we arrived at the chosen battleground and not so much as a scout by the time we were lined up and ready, their absence cutting another notch of doubt into the minister’s brow.

Like a good Errant player, Minister Manshin had hidden his trap in plain sight. Even someone looking for one would fail to see it. The bulk of our foot soldiers had been fielded front and centre, with all mounted soldiers taking the flanks. The only interesting addition was me. As Kin had always done, I sat upon my horse at the front of the army, with General Kitado and four dozen imperial guards, all on horseback. They were used to riding into battle to protect the figure in the dragon armour; it had just never before been me.

General Kitado had seemed troubled by the change since leaving Mei’lian, but there had been no time to do more than accept his oath to serve and hope he was a man of his word. I had left Minister Gadokoi to replace any councillor, secretary, or palace official who could not be trusted, but the Imperial Guard needed to be with their emperor.

Empress.

“Everything is ready, Your Majesty,” Minister Manshin said as he reined in before me.

“Where are they?”

Already the early morning mist was burning away, leaving the rolling hills of Risian empty of all but busy insects and the occasional curious animal.

“They’ll come. They can’t go around us without risking an attack on their rear.”

A nod to General Kitado and he trotted off in the direction of General Baro’s cavalry flank.

My horse shifted its weight beneath me, a motion that only served to increase my own restlessness. I patted his neck. “Soon, Isaji, soon.”

“Your Majesty?”

“Yes, General?”

Kitado cleared his throat and, rather than meet my gaze, looked out over hills empty of enemies. “I would like to take this moment to... to apologise. For having let my guards arrest you. Back in Mei’lian. I had assumed Grace Bachita had been speaking for His Majesty since his arrival, and—”

“And for a long time, everyone had thought he would be the next emperor himself,” I interrupted to spare the poor man his reddening cheeks. “You and your guards did what anyone would have expected of you, General. That said, your apology is welcome. It was a... difficult day.”

“A dark day for Kisia when a man would seek to overturn the emperor’s will for his own ends.”

He said it without a trace of awareness or suspicion, and while I agreed and thanked him for his support and his protection, it was my turn to redden. I had done what I had for the right reasons. If not for the lie, we wouldn’t have marched out to protect the empire at all.

As the morning wore on, I began to fear the Chiltaens weren’t coming, that they had somehow tricked us and were even now marching south to the twin cities. Shimai first, then Mei’lian, and the heart of the empire would be gone.

And then where there had been only green hills and a hazy day, a line of black appeared on the horizon, growing thicker as it approached like a slick of old lamp oil.

My horse shifted with my restlessness. They had come. They were here. This battle I had fought so hard to reach in time would happen and I wished I were elsewhere, somewhere the thud of their approach did not shake the

ground and tremble the air.

Chiltaen flags. Chiltaen banners. All the soldiers in the centre of the horde wore the green of the Nine or the blue of the merchant armies, while on the flanks came the Levanti. They were small at this distance, but beside the Chiltaen foot soldiers they were giants. They did not cheer or shout or cry mantras like the barbarians of the mountain tribes. Instead, they lined up as disciplined as their comrades and proceeded to look bored. One at the front even leant his chin on his hand as around him, the rest of their army stilled.

My heart had sped to a sickening pace as they approached, but as they halted it did not slow. This was it. There was no going back. No escape. Up until that moment I had been sure, desperately sure, that we would win because we could not fail, but as I stared across at the enemy army, I felt equally sure we were all about to die.

Had Emperor Kin felt like this at the beginning of every battle? Or did it get easier? It was the sort of question he would have laughed at rather than answer.

Across the field a white flag rose from the front ranks, and a pair of men on horseback made their way forward into the open space between our armies.

“Will you meet with them, Your Majesty?” General Kitado said.

“Ought I to?”

“It was always Emperor Kin’s way.”

I looked to where I had last seen Minister Manshin, but there was no sign of him. Every eye on the battlefield seemed to be watching me. “Then I suppose we will meet them. With me, General.”

We set our horses walking, my banner man following behind. The two Chiltaens had already halted halfway, but rather than canter to cover the ground faster, I let them wait. The chill of the early morning was long gone and the hot sun burned down upon us as we rode out, making me sweat beneath His Majesty’s golden armour. General Kitado kept pace half a step behind, making it impossible to talk, and the farther out from our army I rode the more vulnerable and exposed I felt. My quick breaths dampened my face inside the dragon mask.

The man I could only assume was Legate Andrus smiled at our approach, his respectful bow belied by an amused expression.

“Almost I thought the ghost of Emperor Kin had come to meet me,” he said when we halted before him. “That armour suits you, Your Majesty.”

“You are trespassing on Kisian soil,” I said, keeping the mask on though I had to speak louder through it. “Leave and take your barbarians with you.”

He pressed a hand to his chest and looked affronted. “Us? Trespassing on Kisian soil? Perhaps you missed your history lessons and are unaware this land belonged to Chiltae.”

“When the first Otako came here with his people, there was no Chiltae. You have built up our crimes as an excuse to attack us again and again, but it does not make your lies true. Accept that three hundred years makes great changes to the world and take advantage of the peace I offer. Turn around now and we will not pursue you.”

“You have clever words for a little girl. I’m impressed, but you don’t frighten me. I imagine the sight of my Levanti frightens you though. I assure you they are every bit as good as you have heard and more. They have cut me a path through your empire and they are not about to stop just because you put on Papa Kin’s armour and rode out to meet me.”

Legate Andrus smiled broadly and leant forward in his saddle. “Although since you did ride all the way out here, you could save the lives not only of your soldiers but also your people by surrendering the throne now.”

“I will never surrender Kisia. Not while I live to fight for her.”

“Was it not your grandfather who said ‘A wise man knows what fights cannot be fought and accepts when he is beaten’? Or was Grace Tianto just your uncle? Honestly, your mother has fucked so many people you’re probably related to half your empire by now.”

He wanted a reaction and I would be damned if I gave him one, glad of the mask that hid my expression.

When I did not answer, he added, “Maybe you’ll be related to half of ours too by the time we’re finished with her.”

His words had been designed to hurt and they did, designed to sicken and enrage, but he hadn’t considered the gift within the cruelty. My mother was alive.

“We’re done here,” I said.

Without parting words, I turned my horse and heard General Kitado follow, but if the Chiltaens shouted anything after me, I did not hear them.

Fury raged so hot in my heart that I barely saw the army before me as my horse carried me back. There had been no interest in suing for peace, no interest in averting the coming battle, only a desire to be cruel.

“Are you ready?” I said as we returned to our place at the front of the army.

“Always ready, Your Majesty.”

I wanted to ask him if I had acquitted myself well, if Emperor Kin would have said something more clever or meaningful or managed to change the legate’s mind, but it was the question of a child, not an empress, and I could not ask it while I feared the answer.

My army had been calm while waiting for our enemy to arrive, had even begun to grow sluggish beneath the hot sun, but there was energy now as they faced the Chiltaens across the field, awaiting only the order to charge.

“Ready!” Manshin cried from somewhere behind me, and a deep drumbeat began to roll through the ranks. Faster. Faster. Its boom like the pounding of our hearts as we stared down the enemy. Then—

“Charge!”

I dug my heels into my horse’s sides before there was time to think, and let the animal have its head. Emperor Kin had always led the way. And so would I.

The distance was everything and nothing, taking both a heartbeat and a lifetime to cross. Dust billowed around us and all was noise, while arrows rained from once clear skies. I tried to loose some back but my hands shook, and I shoved my father’s bow back into its sheath and drew my sword.

An arrow took out the guard beside me. Other riders fell with screams. Horses tumbled onto the bright grass. It was madness, but there was barely time to think before the enemy was before me and I thrust out my sword and hit their front line.

Screams erupted. Metal clashed against metal and movement became almost impossible. Everywhere pikes and shields pressed in and momentum could only take me so far. I hacked at a Chiltaen who came at my leg, another behind him. Kitado was there in a flash of crimson and gone again, replaced by others. We all seemed to be alone and yet together as we pressed on.

A battle cry hollered, taken up by those around me. It rang like the



drums, feeding my pulse, and with a shout of rage, I thrust my blade into face and shoulder and arm and chest, laying about my mount with all the anger I had carried since the day someone had first tried to kill me for nothing but my name.

Time meant nothing in the red fog of battle, and it could have been mere minutes or long hours before Kitado shouted my name.

“Majesty!” He was there at my side, blood tracking down his face to his chin and splattering his armour. “Majesty, we must start to pull back.”

“Yes. Pull back,” I said, surprised to find my voice could still form real human words, not just the roars of an animal. “Yes. Make the call. Let’s do it.”

It has to be slow, Manshin had said. It has to be careful and look natural. As though they are pushing us. As though we are afraid.

Making sure my banner man was with me, I began to fall back, not just to let others pass me on the battlefield but to slowly withdraw. The fear was not all feigned, for in the bright searing light this side of the battle haze, my stomach swirled with sick and the sun was too hot. Dead and dying soldiers lay everywhere, a blanket of green and blue and crimson upon the once pristine grass. Men with severed limbs, their throats gouged and bleeding, eyes missing—screams of pain rose as loud as the roar of battle, and in the moment of space I gained, I lifted my mask and vomited onto the ground. Trembling, I wiped my mouth and dropped the mask back into place to hide my pale fear. Of course Emperor Kin had ridden into battle at the head of every army; he’d been a soldier all his life. I had been a sheltered lady of the court.

Under Manshin’s strict control the central bulk of our army slowly retreated, swallowing as many of the Chiltaen foot soldiers as we could. Soon they would be fighting on three sides, and if we could decimate their ranks, they might withdraw before the Levanti could win them the battle.

Leaving the strategy in Manshin’s hands, I went where the battle took me, never regaining that early fervour but staving off the need to be sick with constant movement. *Don’t stop to think. Don’t stop to look. Just ride and cut down every enemy in your path.* So far they had all been Chiltaen, most of them on foot and at a disadvantage, but all too soon I saw them. The Levanti. At a distance at first, able to be avoided with a quick turn, but growing ever closer. Had one of our cavalry flanks been broken? It was too

hard to tell in the chaos and the gods only knew where Minister Manshin was now.

“Majesty!” General Kitado shouted the warning and I turned as a trio of Levanti charged past. My soldiers had been fighting well. We had been holding our own, but as those three riders sped nearer, I felt the force of General Jikuko’s fear.

Their great thundering beasts sped through the battle as though walking through nothing, their high-stepping hooves crushing anyone who didn’t get out of their way. Though I was sure one of them was a woman, all three had shaved their heads. They wore no helmets, only a symbol painted on the backs of their necks smeared and running with sweat. One held a pair of curved blades that sliced through all but the mail my soldiers wore upon their chests. Arm, heads, legs—anything he could reach he severed with a swing and rode on without so much as a thrilled cry. The man behind was equally dull of expression. Drawing and loosing arrows to help clear the way, he gripped his horse with his knees and rode so close to his companion that he looked near to running into him. The woman brought up the rear, bearing her teeth as she hacked at every hand that tried to reach a weapon to her or her companions.

They were gone as soon as they had come, leaving a trail of death, including a few Chiltaens who had not gotten out of the way fast enough.

“Majesty! Look!”

General Kitado pointed up a nearby hill where as many as a few dozen Levanti lined a ridge. We were fighting with everything we had, but there were still Levanti who had not yet joined the fight. They clustered around a figure on horseback, his face obscured by the mask of a Chiltaen high cleric.

The hieromonk.

I spun back to Kitado. “Manshin. We have to find Manshin.”

It took longer than I had hoped to locate the minister in his knot of guards and messengers—this the brain that kept the battle raging while I drew attention away from him with my golden armour and fluttering banner.

“Minister!” I drew alongside him at the rear of the army. “The hieromonk is here. He—”

“Your Majesty. If we don’t call the retreat soon, we—”

“Retreat?”

“We are rapidly losing ground. The Levanti have cut into our main force on the east flank, and it’s only a matter of time before they take the west. If we fall back now, we may be able to field another—”

“But the hieromonk is here.” I pulled off my mask and thrust my bloodstained blade in the direction of the hill. “If we can take him out, it might turn the tide. Let them watch their leader fall and see how long they last.”

“Your Majesty—”

“No. We cannot retreat. We came here to fight them off, not to be beaten, to protect our people, not leave them to suffer. Send men after the hieromonk.”

I waited for no response but turned and rode away, already dropping my mask back into place as though it would keep out the fear his words had wrought. Retreat. No. We couldn’t. We had to win.

With General Kitado and his men trailing behind me like a flag, I sped back into the battle, teeth-gritted and determined. I called to my soldiers, rallying them as I passed. “With me! With me!” And on I fought, sure if I did everything Emperor Kin would have done then we could beat them back.

When one of Minister Manshin’s messengers came to tell me the battle was lost, I did not believe him. Could not. My soldiers were still fighting. Theirs were still dying. While there was strength in us, I could not believe it over.

Until the west flank of the Levanti charged into us. The path they cut through my army was as wide as a road, and in an effort to escape the carnage, our lines broke.

I called the retreat.

## Chapter 24

### Rah

The Kisian army darkened the hillside. They stood in a mass of disciplined lines dotted with crimson banners, and like a jewel glinting in the sunlight, their empress sat in front astride a black horse. From our vantage point atop a nearby outcrop, we watched Legate Andrus ride out. In the space between the two armies, the golden empress joined him.

“Do the two leaders fight?” I said, my eyes caught to the scene below. “Is that a tradition?”

“No, they talk. They’re meant to try to come to terms to avoid the battle, but Andrus doesn’t want peace. He’ll just taunt her and see if he can make her angry. ‘I might have believed such words from the mouth of Emperor Kin, but I am not frightened by a girl,’” he said in a decent imitation of the legate’s voice. “Things like that. She’ll offer him a chance to walk away. Andrus will refuse, and now, as you see, they are returning to their forces.” Leo shrugged. “So a tradition of sorts, yes.”

I watched the empress ride back, her golden armour shining. “And that’s the woman you were meant to marry?”

“It’s a pity, isn’t it? By all accounts, she’s no beauty but has a sharp enough tongue to make up for it.”

They weren’t the words of a priest, at least not by the standards of our revered horse whisperers, but whenever Leo left his mask hanging around his neck it was easy to forget the title he carried. Until people came to kneel

ten deep before him, seeking his blessing.

Behind us my Swords grew restless. Leo had won many of them over in the last few days, but in their hearts they were warriors, not guards, and down on the field our kin had gathered for what promised to be a fierce and bloody battle.

The two armies started toward one another, the ground shaking as so many boots and hooves struck it as one.

“Are they just going to... walk into each other?” Hehet said behind me, not asking the question of anyone.

“Some of their horses don’t look so bad. Better than the Chiltaen nags,” Asim said, and I had to agree. The Kisian horses on the eastern flank were not as large as ours but were larger and better bred than those the Chiltaen cavalry rode into battle.

Levanti steeds aside, the grandest horse on the battlefield belonged to the Kisian Empress, its gait near perfect as it sped toward the enemy. Leading the charge with her fluttering banner, she flew like a golden arrowhead loosed toward the Chiltaen host. And with the bulk of her army at her back, she hit the line of shields and pikes awaiting her. All became chaos. I gripped my reins so tight that Jinso danced sideways a step, feeling my tension. *I should want the Chiltaens to win, I told myself. I should want the Levanti to win.*

But I could not take my eyes from the Empress’s banner. She had charged fearless into battle though the Kisians had provoked no war. They did not fight because they wanted to but because we were tearing down their towns and their cities, burning their crops and killing their people.

“Are you afraid of death, Rah e’Torin?” Leo said, keeping his eyes on the field below. Farthest from us, upon the western flank, a great host of Kisian cavalry charged into half the Levanti under Sett’s command. A few seconds later, Gideon’s flank smashed into the Kisians on the eastern flank and I shivered, the feeling of watching it as visceral as being there.

“I do not mind how you answer, Rah,” Leo said when I didn’t speak. “As long as you are honest.”

“We are trained not to fear death,” I said, still watching the battle. Each of the soldiers on the far flank was little more than an ant, sunlight gleaming from their armour as from black carapaces. “We are the Swords that hunt so your hands may be clean. We are the Swords that kill so your

soul may be light. We are the Swords that die so you may live.”

“That is not an answer.”

I glanced back at my Swords, every horse as restless as their rider. A few were close enough to hear our conversation. Istet and Asim and Hehet perhaps, and Yitti. Better for them not to hear my answer, and yet Leo’s eyes were on me now, cutting into my skin and awaiting truth. “Yes,” I said. “I fear my soul being found heavy with sins and unfit to be reborn.”

He gave a little grunt of satisfaction as though he had already known my answer. “I used to fear death. When I had no purpose. But now I have one. I know God will ensure I live on in another body as I do in this one. Until I have no bodies left.”

“Like when I forget to wash my tunics and run out of clean ones.”

“Yes,” Leo said. I could hear the smile in his voice. “Exactly like that.”

Behind me, someone hissed.

“Oh shit, look!”

The Empress’s banner vanished, falling into the sea of clashing soldiers, of metallic glints and dirt clouds. I held my breath, heart thumping as though it were my own leader that foundered.

“She’s getting back up!” Himi cried, pointing as the Empress’s banner was lifted once more into the air. “That’s it, girl, get back up.”

“Aren’t you supposed to want us to win?” Hehet said.

“Doesn’t mean I can’t cheer for the girl. Leo said she’s not much more than Juta’s age and she’s out there leading an army. Yes, look, she’s back up!”

“She never fell,” Leo said. “Only her banner man did. But...” His mouth fell slowly open and stayed that way for some minutes. I flicked my gaze between him and the battle, trying to see what he saw, to hear what he heard, and found nothing upon the field below but chaos and death.

“Look at that,” he said, his tone one of awe. “Look at that. They’re retreating.”

“What?”

The word *retreat* spread through my Swords on hisses and spits, but there had been no call, no horn or drum or shout, and for a few long minutes, I still could not see what Leo saw. Then... Both flanks of cavalry were fully occupied with one another, but the main column that had once been an arrow loosed to pierce the Chiltaen defence had curved, sucking

back into itself as little by little the centre retreated. The Kisian soldiers on the outside edges showed no such cowardice and held their ground, though their empress appeared to be failing.

“No, don’t disappoint me, I was cheering for you,” Himi said. “You were at least supposed to make Andrus piss himself before running away.”

“She’s no Herd Master Sassanji,” Hehet said.

Murmured assent buzzed through my Swords.

“He could frighten Korune raiders into retreat without even drawing a weapon.”

“Remember that time he drew Snakegrass and ended up having to slice Gideon’s arm to earn it back?”

Laughter bubbled around me, but memories of Herd Master Sassanji were as bittersweet as memories of Gideon.

“No, look.” Leo pointed toward the empress’s banner, the only way to see her now. “Can you see it?”

“See what?”

His eyes glittered. “She isn’t retreating. She’s just very, very clever. Or her minister of the left is.”

My Swords crowded close along the ridge. “Looks like a retreat to me,” Yitti said at last, patting his mare’s neck. “She is moving away from the enemy. That is the definition of a retreat.”

“But the enemy are following.” Leo looked from him to me to Hehet to Istet, hunting understanding and getting nothing but blank stares. “Following even though the arms of her army haven’t moved? In fact, you could say that those very intrepid soldiers who have chased her are about to find themselves surrounded on three sides by Kisians.”

And the strategy became so starkly obvious that I felt a fool for not seeing it before. Who better than she to draw them in too, when no Chiltaen would ever believe a girl no older than Juta could lead an army?

“What a wife she would have made,” Leo breathed.

I had to agree, but though I did not say so, Leo shot me a knowing smile. That the Kisian Empress was slaughtering Chiltaens didn’t appear to bother him.

The Levanti, meanwhile, were doing a very good job of looking busy and killing few. They could have cut through the Kisian foot soldiers surrounding their allies, but Gideon had given orders that today the

Chiltaens would pay in blood.

“Gideon is clever too.” Leo nodded in the herd master’s direction, though he was hard to tell apart from the sea of similar figures. “In truth, Andrus is lucky to have come so far.”

Concern must have shown in my face, for he smiled. “Don’t worry, my friend. At the end of this journey is merely the beginning of another.”

Almost I asked what he meant, but my courage failed, and when he said no more I focussed my attention on the battlefield.

Detached from the fighting, it all began to blur into a haze of action before me, no individual Levanti discernible in the churning mass. But it looked like the Chiltaens were going to win, especially if Gideon hadn’t yet given the order to fight full strength.

In a disinterested way, I wondered what would happen if we lost and Legate Andrus had to call a retreat. Was that something Chiltaens did? They seemed too pragmatic to want to win or die.

A cry behind me shattered my thoughts. Another was cut short amid a rising symphony of bowstrings and pain. An arrow whisked past my ear, nicking the lobe, but though the sting of tearing flesh sought to blind me, I thrust it away as Hehet pitched forward off her horse, an arrow jutting from the back of her head. Another lodged in Ubaid’s temple as he turned, and in Himi’s shoulder.

“Move!” I cried, gripping Leo’s reins and urging Jinso off the rise. Leo’s horse was no Levanti steed, but it bolted with the speed of fear as the screech of panicked horses and riders swelled to a storm behind us.

“Keep going!” I shouted to Istet and Himi as they charged in Leo’s wake, arrow shafts bouncing in each of their arms. “Protect him!”

“Wait, where are you—?” Istet’s shout was lost in the rush of wind as I dragged Jinso’s reins around, wheeling him back. Pikemen charged from the trees, storming over the bodies of the first fallen Swords, not caring whether they were alive or dead. Yitti had hung back, cutting across the slope with only his knees holding him to his horse while he loosed arrow after arrow at the disciplined Kisian lines.

“Go! Go!” I shouted as more pikemen broke through the trees. Yitti doubled back again, still loosing arrows with whirlwind speed as the last of the surviving Swords sped away down the hill. Leo had made it halfway, but more Kisian soldiers were emerging from the blind side of the outcrop



to block his way.

“Shit!”

Wounded Swords and their mounts scattered the ridge, only Yitti’s barrage between them and the arms of Nassus. “Call them back!” he shouted. “We can take them!”

Hehet and Ubaid were dead where they had fallen. Ren lay face first in the grass and Dhamara was sprawled on the slope, screaming, but Juta was alive, pinned beneath his fallen mount.

“Captain! Help! I can’t—”

There were at least four dozen pikemen, but they were waiting for us down the hill too, and to call back the Swords would be to abandon Leo to his death.

“Rah!” Yitti screamed over the thunder of hooves as he sped by. “I’m running out of arrows! Call them back!”

“Captain!”

Juta, faced with the oncoming Kisians, was shoving at the weight of the dead horse lying across his legs, thumping it like the frightened child he was. But the pikemen were right there, and if Leo died, there would be no freedom.

“Yitti,” I said. “We are outnumbered.”

“Then call them the fuck back!”

Leo would set us free. A few more days and we could go home. But only if he lived.

I shook my head, words failing me even as the pikemen sped their pace, us in their sights. “Captain?” Yitti turned, yanking the second last arrow from his quiver.

*Because losing a few is always better than losing everyone, Gideon had said. Even if it hurts.*

But Leo could set them free even if I was not with them.

“There are more Kisians down there. They have to protect Leo,” I said. “It’s just you and me. You take that side, I’ll take this.”

“But, Captain—”

“Or go if you want to! We’re all going to die if we just sit here!”

No salute. No agreement. Yitti loosed his last arrow, taking an onrushing pikeman in the throat before charging in.

Thundering past the struggling Juta, Yitti and I hit the line of Kisian

pikemen together. Bones cracked beneath Jinso's hooves and I sliced throats and arms and eyes as they appeared through the mass. The sharp tip of a pike scratched Jinso's neck and another pierced my side. Pain lanced through my back, but I spun and hacked a gaping wound in the man's throat. If we could just break their lines, kill enough of them, then maybe they would retreat. If we could just—

“Help, Captain!”

Two soldiers had gotten past us. Were advancing on Juta. Yitti screamed as he tore his blade from a Kisian's eye.

“Captain! Captain! Plea—”

His cry broke off, the words ripped from his tongue as a pike was ripped from his chest, tearing flesh. Then, as though to be sure, the pikeman drove his weapon into Juta's throat, the spray of his blood the last thing I saw before I looked away.

Yitti wheeled about, and without glancing back at the boy crushed beneath his horse, I dug my heels into Jinso's sides and urged him downhill after my healer. Another loss. Another weight upon my soul. Tears stung my eyes, as sure-footed and fast, Jinso wove through my surviving Swords caught now between two advancing walls of Kisian pikemen.

Ahead, Himi and Istet were shielding Leo from the Kisian onslaught. We needed to break through them if we had any hope of getting him out of here alive. “To me!” I shouted, lifting my blade into the air while wind whipped away my tears. “To me!”

We hit the Kisians in a burst of clangs and thuds as weapons met armour and flesh and bone, all grunts and gasps and wet, meaty hacks. No screams, no shouts. There was no time for such things amid the press of death. We rode into it, smashing the Kisian lines and trampling the dead Jinso could not avoid. The press of bodies slowed our progress, but I pushed through them, hacking and cleaving about me with my blades to protect Jinso's sides.

We burst out the other side of their lines, much closer to the main battle than I had thought, and I spun to hunt Leo in my wake. He wasn't there.

“Leo!”

He was caught in a closing crowd of soldiers intent only on him. Himi rode at his side, but there was no sign of Istet, and even as I watched, Baan fell, pulled from his horse by a spear driven into his armpit.

Leo had found a weapon somewhere and fought his way through as no priest ought, tearing through the Kisian ranks as though the hand of his God truly worked through him. Nothing could touch him. He ducked a thrown spear that should have buried itself in his back and smacked another away with the head of his mace.

Gold flashed in the corner of my eye as Empress Miko rode past, all gold and crimson and spinning steel. She slashed and turned and thrust into the faces of her enemies, every move as graceful as the beast her armour resembled. On the plains we had heard tales of the great serpentine dragons of the darklands that slumbered beneath the ground, waiting for summer's heat to warm their blood. Her snarling mask roared their fabled fury, a visceral fury her body mirrored in its every movement, bringing death and fear with every bulge of muscle.

A man on a grand mount rode at her side, another behind, both more interested in her than the enemy. The one at her side cut a wounded Chiltaen down as he lunged at her horse, while the one behind turned a tight circle, checking for rear attack, his eyes moving like a hawk.

A shout sounded behind me. The main battle was spreading toward us up the slope, and if we didn't get Leo out soon, we would be pushed right into it.

Heels to his sides, I urged Jinso back into the mass of soldiers crowding Leo and felt his muscles tense as something cut into his rump. He kept on, pushing through the soldiers as though they were but blades of shoulder-high grass tipped with steel. Ahead Leo fought on, seemingly untouchable, until his horse fell beneath him.

The priest tumbled into the fray. Asim, the closest of my Swords, lunged, one moment on his horse, the next off and cutting a clearing with whirling blades. Yitti shouted something I couldn't make out. A few more lengths and I'd be there, but Jinso tensed again as another cut dug into his haunch, the same swing grazing my leg like a stinging whip.

Leo had not gotten up, but Asim cleared space with the force of a whirlwind.

"Leo?" I shouted. "Leo!"

The young man lay face down.

"Leo!"

I leapt down and grasped his shoulder, rolling him over. "Leo?"

He twitched, then his eyes opened and he looked up at me as though from a distance of many miles and many years. “Rah?” he said.

“Come on, get up!”

He sat up as though jerked by strings of panic. “Damn it!”

Leo got to his feet as Asim fell, a pike buried between his shoulders. One for one. Had Leo’s god traded a soul to send his chosen back to the world? There was no time to wonder, no time to grieve. Leo grabbed the reins of Asim’s horse.

“Wait, Leo, you can’t—”

He took hold of the saddle and hauled himself up. Yissa didn’t buck him off. She didn’t even twitch, just lifted her grand head and stepped forward as though Asim himself had still been on her back.

“We need to get out of here,” I shouted as I leapt into Jinso’s saddle. The Chiltaen force was swarming toward us now, but nearby the empress still fought on, dispatching enemies with her sword, and upon her back a great bow rose to crown her head, its tip blackened like coal. “That way! Through the ranks!”

We gathered Himi as we went. Teppat and Rast fell in with us, and even Istet, seeming to come from nowhere with an arrow still lodged in her arm. I called in the rest, and as a group we wound a path through the advancing Chiltaen ranks, Leo riding tall in the centre like the beacon of hope I alone knew him to be.

A retreat call rose over the battlefield and I closed my eyes in a moment of grief. A moment all I could allow myself, but one I needed. For Juta. For all the Swords I had lost. How easy it would have been to just let Leo die, but our last hope of getting out of here, of going home, would have died with him.

As we reached safety upon the far side of the field, Yitti came up with me, and anything would have been better than his hard silence. Better he had shouted and railed and screamed, better he had challenged me then and there, but he just met my gaze for a smouldering moment, full of anger, before unhooking his bag from his saddle and heading off into the sea of wounded.

## Chapter 25

### Cassandra

Days were meaningless in the darkness. With my hands and feet bound, I had been thrust into a covered cart and left to experience the beauty of Kisia by the bumps and jolts of the uneven road. That would have been bad enough, but the hieromonk's perverse humour had added an excruciating touch. At all times one of his young clerics sat at the other end of the cart, reading aloud from a candlelit copy of the Presage, the Word of the One True God. Even when I swore at them they read. Even when I screamed at them they read. Even when I sang bawdy tavern songs about the big-breasted wife of Sailor Vitus they went on reading. In the end, I saved my breath and tried not to listen.

“And unto Ithcus came the Word of God upon the fiery breath of the silver dragon, Faja, whose scales had been etched with the holy wisdom—”

*This story doesn't make sense.*

*I thought you were a believer,* I said, escaping into a conversation the young man bent over the book could not interrupt.

*I thought so too.*

“And so he spake to the royal house of Ken that they could not take what was not theirs or risk the wrath of God through the breath of Faja—”

Beneath us, the cart gave a rough jolt, and the sound changed from wood on stone to the brush of grass against the wheels.

“Where are we going?” I knew the cleric wouldn't answer. So far I had

made only one of them pause in their reading, and I had to wonder who they thought I was, sitting here tied up and being read to like a child.

*Perhaps you are the mad prophet Ithcus and will ride into battle against the Ken on the back of Faja, dropping scales of—*

“Shut up.”

The cart slowed. The voices of other travellers on the road had become my only connection to the real world I kept reminding myself was out there. Now they were fading away, replaced with the crack of sticks and the thud of wheels dropping into ruts.

The young man kept reading. Even when the cart stopped he kept reading. Light cut through the cart’s canvas cover and still he kept reading. He did not stop until a hand landed upon his shoulder.

“You have done well, Issuk,” the most hateful of voices said. “May God reward your patience and charity.”

“Thank you, Your Holiness. I live to spread the Word of God.”

“Good. Good.” His voice grew louder as he turned his attention from the young cleric to me. “Well, my dear Miss Marius, you shall be glad to know that we have arrived at our destination. My men too will be glad to be rid of you, I believe. One of my Blessed Guard said you smelt worse than a loose-bowelled foal.”

“Funny what happens when you tie someone up and don’t let them out to piss.”

He smiled his bland smile, his hand still weighing heavily upon the young man’s shoulder. “How true.” He stepped forward. “Perhaps I shall burn the cart before returning to Koi.”

“Not going to fight the Kisians then? I’m sure you’re a demon with a sword.”

A flicker of annoyance crossed his face like a breeze catching a lantern flame. But there was no breeze, no air at all in this fetid shithole.

“I shall leave that to my son, Miss Marius, as he better fits your description than I,” he said. The smile returned, and the hieromonk called his guards before he went back out, ducking his head to get beneath the low tentlike exit at the end of the cart. The boy, Issuk, did the same, crawling out into the sunlight with the Presage clasped in one hand and his candle in the other. A blessed guard replaced them and, gripping my ankle, pulled me through my own waste and into the light.

I could not save myself from hitting the ground hard. The impact jolted through me, and stunned by pain and over-bright light, I sat dumb. Voices moved around me. Footsteps. And an ever-present cacophony of croaking and buzzing and the rush of wind through trees.

I squinted but saw only dark shapes. One moved close and every footstep stopped, every voice hushed. Slowly the day came into focus.

*I'm a believer again. And we must be dead because that's a Divine.*

The face that looked down at me owned not a single flaw, every line and curve and feature chiselled and smoothed as though perfected by the finest artist. The man stood taller than all others in the small clearing, and when he knelt it was with a grace not even the best-trained courtier had ever achieved. A pair of honey-coloured eyes examined me, then he nodded to a young Kisian woman standing a few paces behind him.

"Yes," he said. "She is complete. I will take her."

"Take me?" I said, finding my voice. "What do you mean, take me? Who are you?"

The Divine looked back, neither surprise nor annoyance registering on his face. "She appears to be uninjured, and although she is unclean and undernourished, I can see no physical reason for an aggressive response. That suggests psychological trauma. Undesirable, but subjects are rarely so easily obtained. Will you cope? Or shall I find another?"

"Another?" the hieromonk snapped, but the apparent Divine lifted a hand and silence returned. The young woman nodded.

"Very well. I shall take her."

"You cannot take me anywhere!" I snarled. "Who are you?"

For the first time his face showed signs of life, his brows lifting ever so slightly. "My name is Torvash."

"Torvash? Never heard of you." I looked at the hieromonk. "We had a deal. I killed your son. I got you into Koi. I did everything you wanted."

"Yes, Miss Marius, and so have I done what you wanted. You wanted to meet the Witchdoctor and here he is. As it happens, he is as interested in meeting you as you are in meeting him, interested enough to... pay me what I need."

Yanking at my bonds only made my wrists and ankles sting, but I did so all the same. "No! You cannot sell me. I am not a slave."

"No," he agreed, but his eyes narrowed and his lip curled. "You are not a

slave, but I can sell you. That is the joy of having power, while no matter how beautiful you once were or how putrid your tongue, you have none.”

A handful of his guards stood watching from around the edge of the sun-dappled clearing; no one said a word. Even She did not speak. Because he was right. I was nothing. I was expendable. Just another face on the street, another whore in the brothel, another knife for hire, and no one, not even Mama Hera, would miss me when I was gone.

The Witchdoctor strode with long steps to where another cart sat a little way off, its open back stacked with chests and sacks. The young woman followed and they stood a time in silence, looking down at something, while impatience set the hieromonk to pacing—the slow, regal pacing of a priest in prayer.

Witchdoctor returned, an order setting two men in plain blue tunics to heave a long box off the cart. The hieromonk’s hands clenched and unclenched as he watched, his eyes alight like a child awaiting a present on feast day.

“Your payment,” Torvash said, his beautiful features lacking expression and his words lacking respect. “I would suggest you use it wisely, but I do not believe an understanding of wisdom is within the realm of human intellectual capacity.”

“Perhaps it is merely a different sort of wisdom than you expect.” The hieromonk smiled that goddamned dead smile of his. The Witchdoctor deigned no reply.

A cry broke the peace of our little clearing, sending birds squawking from their boughs. Another followed it, muffled, and at first I thought it came from the coffin-like box the men were struggling to carry, but all eyes turned upon the carriage around which the blessed guards had gathered. It came again, a wailing, pained shriek, followed by the hissing of a second voice.

Torvash held out his hand to halt his men, and they stopped halfway between the two carts, their arms trembling with the effort of keeping the coffin aloft. “What is that sound?” he said.

“Nothing you need concern yourself with,” came the haughty reply.

“I concern myself with whatsoever I choose, and today I choose not to be deceived. You have someone else with you, and additional spectators were not an agreed-upon element of this meeting.”



He nodded to his men, and with little sighs of relief, they set the coffin down upon the leaf litter. The head of the Chiltaen church lurched into their path as they made for his carriage. “An unwell friend, nothing more,” he said. “No threat to you.”

The Witchdoctor urged his men on with a wave of his hand. “It is my nature to be curious and my prerogative to be sure.”

The blessed guards would surely have killed the two unarmed men if ordered, but their master clenched his fists and said nothing. The door was yanked open and another shrill cry pierced the day. Then dragged from the carriage, pale and limp like a broken doll, came Empress Hana Ts’ ai.

*What—?*

The two servants carried her between them, her head lolling onto her shoulder as another cry split her lips. Damp blonde curls stuck to her forehead and caught in her mouth, and when her feet touched the ground, her knees buckled amid shivers that racked her body.

“Who is this?”

The hieromonk drew himself up. “No one of importance.”

“That’s a lie,” I said. “That is Empress Hana Ts’ ai, wife of Emperor Kin Ts’ ai of Kisia.”

“Emperor Kin is dead.” He sneered at me. “Like I said, she is no one of importance.”

At the Witchdoctor’s side, the young Kisian woman started tugging on his arm, and though she said not a word, the godlike Torvash nodded and strode forward. “Female, mid-thirties with mixed Chiltaen and Kisian ancestry,” he said, gripping the empress’s face in one hand. She didn’t move, only wailed again, her eyes rolling back in her head. “Further examination is required to ascertain the precise nature of her ailment, but it appears to be chronic, possibly degenerative, that—”

“The imperial disease.”

Torvash turned on the hieromonk. “Explain.”

The highest of clerics under God shrugged. “It comes of claiming to be false gods. Such arrogance draws the wrath of—”

“No. That is not how medicine works.”

“What other explanation can there be for a disease that strikes down so many emperors who call themselves gods?”

The first emotion crossed the Witchdoctor’s sculptured face—a

contemptuous curl of the lip that warmed my heart even as it reddened the hieromonk's cheeks. "One that makes logical sense. I will take this woman as well."

"No. She is not for sale."

"All may be traded. In your own words this female has no importance, and thus you cannot object to me removing from you the burden of her care."

"No."

"Very well." The Witchdoctor pointed at the box. "Return it to the cart."

His men gently lowered Empress Hana onto the grass to return to their original burden. They lifted it with grunts of effort, no other sound cutting the tense peace of the clearing. The hieromonk stared at the box and the young Kisian woman stared at the broken empress twitching on the ground. I was but a spectator caught between two forces I didn't understand.

*Is the deal off?* She said, voicing the ill ease I could not. *It cannot be. We need him we need—*

*Shh!*

By the look on the hieromonk's face, I didn't like our chances. He looked ready to murder everyone present.

"Stop!" he barked as the men reached the cart with their heavy burden. "Very well." He glared at Torvash. "You may have them both. It is, as you say, quite a burden to care for a woman who is of no value. Captain Aeneas, help Her Majesty to Master Torvash's cart."

I hadn't seen the captain standing beside the carriage, but he stepped forward now, the dappled light of the clearing falling upon his scarred face. He did not look my way and, rather than order one of his men to do so, went himself to kneel before Empress Hana. With little effort, he picked up the sick, sweating woman and carried her across the clearing as the two servants returned with the heavy box.

Leaving the moaning empress on the Witchdoctor's cart, Captain Aeneas returned to his master's side. He glanced at me then, a brief look that contained not even a hint of recognition.

Any hope of being forgotten died as Torvash strode toward me, his long-legged gait eating the space in three quick strides.

"Don't you dare touch me," I said. "You will regret you were ever born if you do."

“I was not born,” said the man. “Not as you consider the meaning of the word.”

“I will kill you. I will gouge out your eyes and—”

He looked to the Kisian woman at his side. “Make her quiet. I do not wish to hear her voice any more this day.”

A nod.

“I could snap you like a twig, girl,” I said. “I might be bound now, but I hold one hell of a grudge.”

Heedless of my threats, she pulled an instrument from a pouch at her waist, something like a fat sewing needle with a vial upon the end. “What the fuck is that?” I said. “No. No!” I kicked out with my tied feet, but all I achieved was falling sideways, stones cutting into my arm and my cheek and my leg. Inside my head, She started to laugh as the girl brandished the thing like a blade.

“No! Don’t! Please!”

The needle sank into the flesh of my arm, oozing cold and pain, and like a blade it hurt more as it was withdrawn. The girl stepped back, cocking her head to the side in a curious fashion. While She laughed, I screamed, both sounds melting together into a descending wail as the sunny clearing began to spin. Then a tide of panic washed up and dragged me down into its darkness.

## Chapter 26

### Miko

Failure had not been an option. Retreat had not been an option. Abandoning my people had not been an option. Yet even from the inner palace in Mei'lian, a blind man could not have missed the smoke rising from Shimai, so thick was its stink in the air. A final stand led by General Jikuko had failed to hold the city.

Tian. Koi. Suway. Tancho. Risian. The Chiltaens had marched a trail of destruction through the centre of my empire, and without reinforcements from Syan, our stand at Risian had failed. Now Shimai had gone and Mei'lian was next.

We might survive if we held them off until the rains, but Mei'lian's walls were old, her gates more used to controlling the movement of her citizens than protecting them from outside threat. There had been plans to replace them, to strengthen the city's defences after the rebellion, but so much had needed rebuilding the money had soon run dry.

Minister Manshin cleared his throat to break the silence. "There is still no word from Syan, Majesty."

I said nothing, just watched the black plumes of smoke rise like spirits seeking freedom.

A servant yanked hard, tightening the straps about my leather tunic. From its stand, the emperor's dragon armour glared upon us all.

"It may make no difference now," he went on without my

encouragement. “The Chiltaens have been pushing hard to reach the capital before the rains set in. There is no reason to think they will wait now. They may strike tomorrow. Or even during the night. Either way we must be ready.”

I had ridden out at the head of my army. I had faced the enemy with pride. I had done everything Kin would have done, and yet here I stood on the brink of destruction. If Mei’lian fell, the empire would crumble, divided into east and west, and the as yet unconquered lands south of the Tzitzu River.

“The gates are closed,” Manshin said in his usual low rumbling growl. “The city guards are stockpiling stones and arrows and barrels of oil along the walls. If the Bahains arrive, we could ride out and meet them again, but...”

He let the words trail off. Minister Gadokoi had so far kept to the safety of silence, but he had a way of oozing his emotions into a room that left no one in doubt of his apprehension.

Both men stepped back when the two servants lifted the breastplate over my head. It had belonged to Emperor Kin, but though it was not a perfect fit, it had needed only minor adjustments to make it usable. I’d never thought to be glad of my height and breadth; too often had I been the sturdy oak in a garden of willows and lilies. Of the pair of us, Tanaka had always been the finer and more graceful.

I could have faced anything with him at my side. Even with two loyal ministers who had believed in me, I had never felt more alone.

“Has there been any news of my mother?”

“No, Your Majesty.” Gadokoi spoke this time, apology in his tone. “Nothing. Only a poor tactician would kill her though, so... there is hope yet.”

Hope she might be cast before me as a prisoner to force my surrender. And if that happened... I knew what I ought to do; I just wasn’t sure I could.

More straps were pulled, none too gently, but I stood my ground as the servants yanked and tied and tightened.

“Are you sure you wish to fight, Your Majesty?” Gadokoi said, his gaze slipping to the disembodied dragon head upon the stand—the war mask of Emperor Kin. It had taken all my self-control not to snap it when the

armourers had first brought it out, and it took all my self-control now to speak of him with respect.

“The people of Kisia were ruled for over thirty years by a man who rode against the Chiltaens,” I said, my fingers curling to fists. “And against the mountain tribes, and every rebellion small or large. It might have been to mock that they first called him the soldier emperor, but they loved him for it. What other reports?”

Gadokoi cleared his throat. “There has been no word from Prince Jie and his battalions, though your message has surely reached him.”

“He might still come in time,” I said, though I did not believe my own words. “How are our defences?”

“The north gates are being reinforced as we speak, though the new commander of the city guard says he needs more time, more men, and more wood.”

“Tell him he may have more men and more wood but there is no more time. Send out the palace guard if no other labour can be found. And every storehouse is to open their gates to Commander Rokoro by order of the Empress.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” He cleared his throat again. “Chancellor Goro informs me the palace has stores enough to make it frugally through the winter, but my last check upon the city granaries was not so favourable. We would make it, but not without losing some of the poor and the weak.”

“There will be time to consider the proper division of supplies if we survive the night, Minister,” I said. “Which, having seen how the Levanti fight and knowing how easily Koi fell, seems unlikely.”

He grimaced but nodded. “We are in the hands of the gods.”

Manshin cleared his throat. “There is always... the imperial cellar. It leads only to Shimai, but if they have moved on from there, then—”

“If you are suggesting that I abandon my people,” I snarled, rounding on him, “then you may take your foul words elsewhere. I would not abandon Risian without a fight and I will not abandon my capital. I am the Empress of Kisia and I will fight for her as my father would have done—as *both* my fathers would have done.”

Neither man met my blazing gaze, but both bowed. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

The servants stepped back while the imperial armourer circled me, assessing each and every strap and buckle and plate. I rolled my shoulders.

It was heavy, but not as heavy as it looked—not as heavy as the weight of the empire it conferred upon my shoulders. A tug here, a shake there, and the man nodded.

“You are ready, Your Majesty,” he said. “Although before you wear it next, I suggest a slight shortening of the breastplate. It will allow you greater ease of movement at your hip.”

“See to it.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

I lifted the dragon mask off its stand and ran my fingers over its lacquer and the soft, worn leather against which Kin’s skin had pressed, had sweated, had bled for this empire. The old bastard had destroyed everything, but I could not forget that under his rule, Kisia had been kept whole. The people had been fed and the throne defended though he had suffered for it.

“My sword.” Minister Manshin took the blade from its stand and bowed as he put it in my hand. My father’s bow came next. Blackened Hacho, her presence ever tangible. She slid easily into the holster on my back, nestled amid the arrows she would speed to throats and eyes, hastening the death of our enemies.

Darkness had rolled across the plain and over the city, but where a sea of lights should have spread before me, Mei’lian was a shadow of itself, oil too precious to burn merely for light.

Once again, Minister Gadokoi cleared that damned throat of his. “Are you sure this is wise, Your Majesty? It would be much safer if you stayed here. The palace—”

“I will not hide. The people need a warrior, so their warrior I will be. Is General Kitado ready?”

Gadokoi bowed. “Yes, Your Majesty. He is waiting outside with a dozen of his men.”

“Good. Then it’s time.”

“There is... one other thing, Your Majesty.” Gadokoi didn’t clear his throat this time, though his gaze flicked to Manshin and back and his lips struck a grim line. “The succession.”

“The succession?”

He spread apologetic hands. “Who should take the throne should you fall in battle? May Empress Miko live forever.”

I had no intention of dying, but Tanaka hadn't planned to die either. Nor had Kin. Death did not wait until one was ready.

"There is of course Prince Jie," the man went on. "Though he is not of age and would need a regent capable of leading Kisia in war."

"No regents. Kisia needs a soldier, one that can unite its people in common cause against the Chiltaens." I turned to Minister Manshin. "In fact, you are the best candidate, Your Excellency."

"Me?"

His shock was apparent.

"Yes, you. Your daughter was promised to Prince Tanaka and might have been empress had this tragedy not befallen us. This is common knowledge. You are the head of a family that has run alongside ours since the rebellion. You are our military commander. Your lands are in the north, yet you have remained at your position rather than abandon it to protect your home. You are a loyal subject of the empire, and that, Minister, is what Kisia needs. Have the scribes draw up a decree that I might sign, with Minister Gadokoi as my witness."

"If... if you are sure, Your Majesty. I am no god."

"Neither were the Ts'ai or the Otakos, Minister. Gods are made in the eyes of men not the wombs of women."

Both men bowed, and my heart swelled at having done something right for Kisia, something I would not doubt with my every waking thought. I had made too many mistakes, all of them piling up to reach this moment.

When it was done, I joined General Kitado and his men on the highest landing of the palace's great spire. "Movement has been sighted on the plain, Your Majesty," the general said in greeting. "Commander Rokoro is forming a defence along the north wall."

"Nothing to the south?"

"Nothing, Your Majesty, but there are lookouts posted at every tower. If something moves out there, we'll see it."

"Good." I slid the mask over my face, its leather already warm from the touch of my hand. It would not protect me from the swing of an axe or the slash of a blade, but it transformed me from a young woman playing at war to the Dragon Emperor they needed me to be. Through its slit eyes I would command my second battle, its fierce visage hiding all fear. "Let's go."

We rode out through a night-clad city choking with that very same fear,



past boarded-up houses and clumps of people gathered to pray in the darkness. Two men rode ahead, a torchbearer and a man carrying one of my mother's banners—a Ts'ai dragon chasing a pike across a crimson ground.

With my eyes on the trail of flame ahead, I did not see those who watched our passing, but I kept myself stiff and proud and exuding an air of confidence that their hope might be strengthened.

In the open square before the north gates the city guard had gathered, not lined up and ready but sitting and talking, drinking, laughing, anything to ease the tension of a night spent waiting. Into their midst we rode, and like flowers opening to the sun they stood, bowed, and cried "Long live Empress Miko!" to the night sky.

Commander Rokoro, the untrustworthy Commander Bo's replacement, descended from the wall two stairs at a time. "Your Majesty."

"Commander," I said, speaking loudly to combat the muffling of the mask. "I have come to wait with my people. To fight with my people. To die with my people."

This declaration produced a cheer from those close enough to hear, and I had to thank the deadening of the mask for I had heard my voice tremble.

"We are honoured, Your Majesty," the commander said.

"Any movement?"

"Our best pair of eyes believes he can see them crossing the plain in the dark," the commander said. "But without the blessing of the moon it is impossible for us to be sure. We will soon see if he is right."

"And if he is?"

"Then they will be here with the dawn."

Inside my golden shell my heart sped to a panic, breath huffing inside the mask. "Show me."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Atop the city walls more guards waited, along with a portion of the soldiers from our standing battalion and a large number of common folk. Some had brought their own bows or carried an assortment of melee weapons, while the untrained sat waiting with pails full of sharp-edged stones.

As I walked the north wall with Commander Rokoro, the defenders rose and bowed, murmuring long life to me. Some knelt, reaching up their hands in supplication, and just as I had seen Kin do, I gave them the blessing they

sought, though I knew I was no god.

I blessed the soldiers waiting in the courtyard and around the surrounding streets with Rokoro in tow, and when there was nothing left to do I returned to the wall. Unable to stay still, I began walking toward the next tower. General Kitado's men remained at the gatehouse, but he walked with me, a torch in his hand to light the way. Had things gone differently it might have been General Ryoji walking by my side. The two men couldn't have been more different. Kitado lacked most of Ryoji's fading handsomeness and all of his charm. He was tall, broad, and brusque, and though he often favoured the world with a smile, it was not the sort of smile people returned.

We walked tower to tower in silence, blanketed in the humidity of an oppressive night. Sweat gathered beneath my armour and dampened my leathers, but not until we were entirely alone did I take off my mask to cool my hot cheeks.

I had stood upon the walls of Mei'lian before. In the darkness beyond them stood houses and farms, inns and shrines, all nestled amongst villages and twisting roads—life spreading from the city walls like water leaking from an old barrel. It had not always been so. Mei'lian had once stood stark and alone on the southern bank of the Tzitzu, but a hundred years ago Emperor Tsubasa had built a palace here, and so the people had come.

"This seems a particularly stupid place to build a city," I said, more to myself than to Kitado. "I wonder what made Emperor Tsubasa choose here."

"They say there were once five great monoliths here, Your Majesty, tall pinnacles of stone like the hand of a god that protected all who camped in their lea."

"Really?"

He shrugged, his slanting smile as off-putting as ever. "So the story goes."

"I have never heard it."

"Perhaps it is not the sort of old tale that gets told to princesses, Your Majesty."

"Then you had best correct my education. What happened to them?"

General Kitado halted at my side as I stared out over the dark plain. "It is said that when the gods gave the Crimson Throne to the first Otako

emperor, the stone fingers crumbled because they were no longer needed. Kisia had a new protector.”

Not a story told to a *Ts'ai* princess then. “So they built a city here, out of the stone?”

“So they say, Your Majesty, but it is, of course, merely a story.”

I snorted a little laugh. “It is a better reason than any other I can think of. There are neither great resources here nor any great defence. Koi is—was protected by the curve of the Kuro Mountains. Shimai sits upon the river. Syan upon the sea. Everything has to come to Mei'lian by cart or on foot.”

“Including our enemies, Your Majesty.”

“Yes, but there is plenty of open space for them to get comfortable should they decide to lay siege.”

General Kitado shook his head. “I don't think they'll do that, Your Majesty. The Chiltaens aren't fond of our rains. They would struggle to keep their soldiers happy in flooded camps with their tents ankle-deep in the stink of overflowing latrine... pardon my plain speaking, Your Majesty.”

“Your plain speaking is most welcome, General,” I said turning to walk on. “People tell me more now I am the empress but still not enough.”

By the time we had made a full circuit, the first colour of sunrise stained the eastern horizon. But as predawn light crept across the land it left a dark stain upon the northern plain, for there, massed beyond the reach of any arrow, stood the Chiltaen army.

The defenders atop Mei'lian's northern wall were on their feet when we returned, pointing and staring and blinking sleepy eyes as they prepared their weapons. Commanders threaded through them, giving orders. Shouts came from the courtyard below. And out in the city, gongs began to sound.

While chaos reigned around me, I hunted siege engines in the dissipating gloom. A dozen catapults sat at the front of their army—half of them our own, painted with the *Ts'ai* dragon. Siege ladders dotted the ranks and a ram stood like a hulking beast in the centre. These were trouble, but it was at the Levanti I stared.

“It must be costing them a fortune to pay so many mercenaries,” I said as Minister Manshin joined me, having donned his own armour in the night. “I suppose it is too much to hope they will run out of money and the Levanti will turn on them?”

“As useless as hoping for the rains to save us, Your Majesty,” he said. “Unless we see the Bahains or Jie’s battalions upon the horizon, there is just us and them, and I would rather meet a dozen Chiltaens in combat than a single Levanti.”

I agreed. Those tall monsters of men and women had struck fear into my heart, so easily did they slit throats and spill guts only to ride on without a second glance.

“I feel I would be failing in my duty if I did not attempt once more to persuade you to return to the safety of the palace, Your Majesty,” Manshin said, the dawn light gilding the buckles of his armour. “There is no guarantee that General Kitado and his men can keep you safe out here.”

“There is no guarantee I would be safe inside my palace either.”

In silence we watched light spill across the plains until there were no shadows left in which the enemy could hide.

“Six thousand?” General Kitado said. “It is hard to be sure, but I don’t see how it can be less.”

I hunted their ranks again. At Risian, Legate Andrus had signalled a desire to speak, but no flag had yet been lifted. No one rode toward the gates alone. They just stood in their ranks and let fear blanket my city. Our archers stood with arrows nocked but not drawn. Nearby a man hefted a large stone.

“What are they waiting for?” I said, pinching Manshin’s sleeve.

“Nothing, Your Majesty,” he said. “They just want us to think they are.”

He walked off along the wall, repeating the same gruff words to others. At my side, General Kitado’s hand rested upon his sword hilt. He carried no bow, no spear, his entire purpose the protection of my person.

Movement drew my eye back to the army upon the plain—movement beside the catapults. Around me, soldiers shifted weight from foot to foot. General Kitado edged closer, tense, but even as the catapults prepared to fire, a figure stepped forward from the central mass. The simple robes of a Chiltaen cleric were hard to miss even at such a distance.

“Is that the hieromonk again?”

“No, Your Majesty,” General Kitado said. “They say it’s Dom Leo Villius who rides with the Chiltaen army. And that he cannot be killed because God protects him.”

God and a whole group of Levanti. It was the grey-robed figure from the

hill at Risian. “It cannot be Leo Villius. Tanaka killed him.”

“They say he was brought back to life by his god, that he has been given a purpose.”

I rounded on him. “Who is ‘they’?”

Kitado shrugged. “I hear it from the soldiers mostly, Your Majesty. They talk to everyone. Farmers, carters, travellers. The women who make their gold by following armies around.”

“It sounds like nonsense to me.”

“To me, too, Your Majesty, but how else does a dead man walk again?”

I had no answer. Dom Villius, the man I ought to have married, the man Tanaka had killed and been killed for, standing there before the city with no weapon in his hand. He didn’t need one. His weapon was a whole army.

The catapults launched.

“Incoming!” Manshin roared. My gaze caught on the first of the soaring stones as one tumbled through the air and smashed into the gatehouse, shaking the wall beneath my feet. Another one hit farther along, then another, trembling the foundations. They would not be able to reload such enormous stones, but the knowledge was no comfort as a fourth crashed through the top of the gatehouse, taking screaming soldiers with it.

General Kitado forced me down amid the stone rain, his body jerking as bricks landed upon him instead of me. But for the strength of my breastplate, his weight might have crushed the air from my lungs, but he soon rolled off speaking unheeded apologies. And while my head spun, people screamed. Fire lit the sky. Kitado thrust me into the lea of the broken gatehouse as a flaming ball smashed into the wall, taking more soldiers with it as it hurtled on into the city still spitting fire.

The Chiltaen host advanced, leaving islands of Levanti horsemen behind.

“Archers, ready!” Manshin’s shout cleaved through the panic, and I drew Hacho, an arrow with her. Ryoji had said my father’s evil lived on in its heart, and if anyone could beat back the Chiltaens, it was Katashi Otako.

“Hold!”

They were not quite close enough, but at the front of the marching horde the slaves bearing siege ladders were almost in range.

“Hold!”

With an arrow nocked, Hacho felt hungry for death, every moment spent

waiting a moment too many.

“Loose!”

I let the arrow fly, drawing another before the first had reached its target and loosing it to the chase. Just like in training all those mornings, when Tanaka and I had competed to see who could loose the most arrows before General Ryoji called time. Now the targets were men and there was no end in sight.

The first siege ladder slammed into the parapet, and in a heartbeat, Chiltaen slaves lacking armour leapt over the edge. The first were cut down and sent falling back onto their comrades. One skewered an archer before a blade between the ribs sent him to judgement, but one success was the breaking of a dam. More came. More killed. One saw me and charged. To kill the empress. Perhaps it would have earned him freedom.

General Kitado sliced his legs from beneath him. A sword tip to the back of the neck and he was done, but there were more. More slaves, more soldiers, more balls of flaming pitch and straw. More screams. More shouts. More death. I stood behind Kitado with my bow drawn, dispatching enemies who got through the defence.

Out on the field the Levanti still had not moved.

“Pull back!”

A boom shook the wall beneath my feet.

“No! Hold!”

A second boom trembled the world.

“Rokoro, get those men ready!” Manshin shouted. “They’re using a ram! Bring the oil!”

The terrible boom of the battering ram shuddered through me again, and more soldiers and slaves poured up the siege ladders like water flowing toward the sky.

And still the Levanti waited.

“We must get out of here, Your Majesty!” General Kitado shouted over the noise. Blood splattered his face and covered his hands.

“I told you, I will not—”

“I know what you told me, Your Majesty, but if we don’t go now, I cannot guarantee your safety. I will die protecting you to whatever end, but there may be no one left to take my place.”

The Imperial Guard hovering around me had been depleted to three, and

the dreadful crack of splintering wood cut through all. And out on the plain, the Levanti finally broke their lines and rode toward the gates.

Minister Manshin appeared at my side, blood oozing from a wound on his arm. “This way, Your Majesty!” he said. “Follow me.”

Striding with purpose, he took the stairs down into the city, each littered with the dead and the dying, with limbs and blood and burned-out crisps of straw. The stone shook beneath our feet with the next smash of the ram and I had to steady myself with a hand upon the wall.

Down in the square, men were bracing the gates with wood, with shields, even with their bodies, anything they could grab in their desperation to stop the Chiltaens getting in.

A word to Commander Rokoro and Manshin led us on. I wanted to stop him, to call him back and demand to know where we were going, but there were too many eyes to see me waver. I had to stride on with confidence, bow in hand, hot huffs of breath dampening the inside of my mask.

General Kitado and three of his men followed, and in a short procession, we wended our way through the cluttered streets, leaving the noise behind though it would chase us soon enough. The moment those gates opened, Levanti would pour into the city on a tide of death. I had hoped to last the day. Two perhaps. Enough time that maybe, just maybe, Jie or Bahain would miraculously arrive. Hope was a terrible thing.

The streets cleared as we left the northern district, and I caught up to walk beside Manshin as he wrapped a sash around the wound on his arm. “Where are we going?” I said as we entered the silk district of all places. Frightened faces peered from windows as we passed. “We ought not to be walking away from a battle. That gate could give at any moment.”

“Which is exactly why you need to follow me.”

I stopped in the middle of the street. “I told you, I will not—”

A door opened behind me and a family emerged, murmuring prayers. Even the smallest of their children bowed, his little face pressed to the dirty stones. Another family followed, and a third, then a huddle of silk workers knelt before me with rolls of their finest weaves held out in shaking hands.

“You see this,” Manshin said, stepping close enough to hiss in my ear. “This is why you have to follow me. This is why you have to listen to me. Their emperor has always been the one they worship. The one they follow and believe in. The city is already lost. It must be surrendered, it—”

“No!”

“Your Majesty.” He lowered his voice further. The people were chanting their prayers now, more and more adding to the throng gathering around us. “You must listen to me. If we do not surrender, these people will die. Everything will be burned and there will be nothing left to fight for. A city surrendered can be fought for another day. An empire sundered can be rebuilt. But only if its people have someone to fight for. Someone to fight with. You are that person now, Your Majesty. You took that role. I did not help you take the throne merely for my own ends, but because I saw something in you worth believing in. You are the last Otako. You are the strongest Ts’ai. You are Kisia’s hope, and I cannot allow you to die here and take the empire with you.”

More people emerged from houses and shrines along the street, many bearing gifts, all bowing. Manshin’s words cut to my soul. I hated his truth. I had wanted to be their god. I had wanted to fight their battles. But my dream of ruling with Tanaka had been nebulously grand, the two of us in our palace far away from the petty hatred of our parents, free, glorious, strong. It had never been like this.

I lifted my mask. “My blessing upon you all,” I said. “And upon your families.”

At my side, Manshin said, “We have to go.”

He was right and my heart broke anew. I had not been able to stop Tanaka’s head from hitting the floor. I had not been able to stop the Levanti tide at Risian. And I could not stop that ram smashing down my gates. Fate refused to be locked out.

“Whatever may come,” I went on, my voice catching, “whatever hardship and pain, we must bear with fortitude. Whatever they may do to us we shall rise again, stronger, fiercer, wiser, the gods ever at our side. Tell all you can that whatever they might hear, you have not been abandoned. You have not been cast to the enemy. They will not be allowed to win. The Otakos are protectors of this land, and I will protect you to my dying breath.”

“Long live Empress Miko!” they chanted, faces still to the ground, and I wondered how much they had understood. I hoped and feared it had been enough.

Grim, Minister Manshin urged me on and I turned from them, from their



bowed forms and their gifts upheld beneath a flame-filled sky.

I didn't recognise the street he led me to. A large old magnolia stood in the centre of a square, shading all around it, charms and scrolls hanging from its lower branches. Manshin did not look at it as he passed beneath its boughs, but he looked back, checking to see we were with him as he turned into a side gate.

"Quick, before we are seen." He urged us on. The stable yard beyond the gate was as empty as the streets had been, its buildings long abandoned.

"What is this place?" I said, looking around at the decay.

"It was a private yard many years ago," Manshin said. "It is not used now. Quickly, Your Majesty. We don't have much time."

I followed him to a building seemingly no different to any other. The transition from light to darkness blinded me for a moment, and I stood in the doorway, squinting to make out Manshin's figure in the gloom. He knelt, patting the ground, hunting for something. "Ah. Good." He picked up a stone and threw it over his shoulder. "There is a tunnel."

"You mean the imperial cellar? To Shimai? Doesn't that start—?"

"No. This was part of a tunnel that once led all the way beneath the Tzitzzi River, long forgotten until your father discovered it and cleared it out enough to gain entrance to Mei'lian in his rebellion. Emperor Kin deemed it too useful and too dangerous to cave in with the others and had each end covered with rubble to hide it."

"You want me to—"

"Your Majesty." He got to his feet. "If you are caught, they will kill you, but not before they torture and humiliate you. This is no political manoeuvre. This is conquest. The best you could hope for is being forced into marriage so no Kisians could rally behind you. The worst... You have to go. Now. Before they come looking for you."

"Let them try."

"You are an empress in golden armour, Your Majesty. You are not hard to find, and you can be sure every soldier is under orders to capture you alive. If the gate has not already given way, it will soon."

Screams sounded in the distance. Manshin pointed at the rubble. "Dig," he said to the imperial guards. "Fast." He gripped General Kitado's arm. "It is your job to protect Her Majesty, General," he said. "You alone go with her. A pair of travellers will be less conspicuous and will move much faster.

Take her south, or make it to Syan if you can.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

I looked from one to the other, overwhelmed by their care. For so many years I’d had to watch every shadow and fear every footstep, but these men weren’t here because they had to be, they were here because they believed I was worth fighting for.

“Give me your armour, Your Majesty.”

Worth dying for.

“No.”

“Yes.” Manshin held out his hand. “They are looking for an empress with golden armour and the face of a dragon, not for a young woman hiding in a stable yard. Wearing it will condemn you, but if I wear it, I can go back into battle and buy you time. They will not think to hunt for you while they believe they can see you fighting.”

“When they catch you they will kill you.” Tears choked my words, because I knew it would be worse than that. All those things he had said they would do to me, they would do to him.

“They will kill me no matter what I wear, Your Majesty. I am the minister of the left. I command the battalions of the Rising Army. Like you, I am too dangerous to keep alive. But unlike you, I am replaceable.”

The clatter of stones filled the dark space as the guards dug out the passage, stone by stone. Once more, I hated Manshin for his truth I could not fault and his honour I could not refuse. Sick to the pit of my stomach, I took off the mask. “No empress could have a truer servant, nor Kisia a finer minister,” I said, handing it to him. “May the gods spare you and bring you safely back to my side in my time of need.”

He bowed, mask in hand. “There would be no greater honour than to continue serving you, Your Majesty. It was, in truth, a very fine shot.”

I laughed because to cry would make it harder to bear. While the guards dug, he helped me remove the imperial armour. He was larger around the middle than Kin or I had been, but the straps were forgiving and he would pass for me at a glance.

Kitado and I checked him over, and having been deemed ready, he bowed once more. “Good fortune to you, Your Majesty. May you conquer our enemies when the time comes.”

I bowed in return. His position demanded no such respect from me, but

his actions did. By the time I straightened he was gone, a last glint of gold all I saw.

Dressed only in my leathers, I knelt with my guards and started to dig. Outside, the sounds of war rose around us, distant screams and running steps growing ever closer. Hooves thundered by but still we dug, shifting stone after stone. My people screamed. Children cried. The air filled with the stink of sweat and smoke and death and still we dug. I listened to my people die, to their pain, and when the stones cut my hands and bloodied my knees, it was nothing to their suffering. Scooping dirt and rubble, we dug until at last a waft of stale air punched up through a small opening. Stones tumbled into it, disappearing into an abyss.

When it was large enough, I squeezed through, stones scraping my arms and my cheeks. It opened into a tunnel and, losing my footing, I tumbled into the dusty space beneath the city. General Kitado followed, and together we ran in the darkness.

## Chapter 27

### Rah

Splinters burst from the gates like blood spurting from a wound. Holes were appearing now, holes the soldiers on the inside tried to patch, but the slaves just drew back the ram again. The gates juddered, not bending but straining against their hinges, time all that stood between us and the inside of Mei'lian.

I ought to have been glad. All we had to do was get Leo inside the throne room and we would be free, but too much death had stood in the way.

Ahead, Gideon sat still and patient at the front of the Levanti, his horse not so much as twitching its head despite the smell of smoke and blood upon the air. Around us the catapults had ceased firing, but still Jinso threw up his head, nervous and ill at ease. He had been fortunate to make it out of the battle of Risian at all.

“Stay close,” Leo said, and the words hit as hard as the ram smashing into the gates. To either side, Chiltaen foot soldiers were climbing the walls like scurrying ants. “Leave the fighting to the others.”

“As you wish, Your Grace,” I said, trying not to think of all we had lost to reach this moment.

At last the tortured wood fractured beneath the ram's steady onslaught and the gates fell, hinges twisting and crying out. Like a flood, soldiers poured through the opening, Legate Andrus's mounted unit in the lead,

followed by Gideon and his First Swords, others left to jostle for position. Leo's eyes were bright as his destination neared, but he did not push or shove or shout, just let his horse slowly walk forward. I followed in his wake as the Chiltaen army broke around him like a stone in a river.

When at last we were inside the city, the stink of blood and smoke punched me in the face. I held on with my knees as Jinso's hooves slid on entrails and bodies in the square, space opening before us as Chiltaens and Levanti alike sped in every direction, cutting down any and all they saw. In such narrow streets there would be no escape.

"Come," Leo said, no weapon in his hand though enemies were everywhere. I had begged him to wear armour, but he had merely smiled and shaken his head. A man of God needed no other protection than that of his god's blessing, he had said. To wear armour would be to spurn that protection, just as to wear finery would be to put himself above others.

I stayed close, sword drawn, hunting the clogged streets for danger. Even a well-thrown stone could knock him from his horse. Some of my Swords rode ahead, most behind, but they were all more interested in the carnage around us than in the man we were meant to protect. At least with Legate Andrus having gone ahead we rode in his wake of death. Soldiers, commoners, men, women, children, horses—there had been no distinction made, death given to all more fairly than food was given to his own men. Leo seemed to see nothing but his distant goal and hurried his mount on through the maze of buildings clustered close.

The city of Mei'lian was stranger than any other I had yet seen. It felt old, revered, tangled. I could find no words to do it justice. I had no reason to care for it, yet sadness at its burn-scarred walls and torn banners almost overwhelmed me. In the square before the grand palace the feeling grew stronger, as though I were treading on the graves of gods.

Sett trotted toward us across the stones. "What are you doing here, Rah?" he called, almost before he was in earshot. The square was oddly quiet, the carnage distant. Fading.

"I'm protecting His Grace," I said, disliking Sett's scowl. I hunted the gathered Swords for Gideon, but though the First Swords of Torin were present, he was not. Dishiva's Swords were there too, along with many others—many Levanti gathered despite the battle still raging. "Where is Gideon?"

“With the Legate.” Short. Sharp. “You should stay here until it is safe.”

“I go where His Grace goes.”

Sett’s gaze flicked to Leo, but the priest did not acknowledge him, just rode on at his easy pace toward the palace gates. They were open, one lying askew, the other flat to the ground like a painted floorboard.

“Rah.” Sett spoke in warning, but I rode past him. His voice ought to have been that of my herd, of my honour code, of an authority closer than me to the gods, but it was Leo I followed toward the palace gates because Leo was our way home. He had to be. I had come too far and staked too much to turn aside now.

“Leave all but a dozen of your Swords here,” Leo said, dismounting from his horse. “I do not think we will find trouble inside. All the trouble seems to be dead already.”

“As you wish,” I said, and turned to Yitti. We had not spoken since the battle at Risian and he seemed unwilling to speak now, already naming twelve riders to dismount and follow us inside while the rest remained. There was no complaint, no discussion, the weight of the building seeming to press upon us all.

It grew more oppressive inside the walls.

Dead men filled a large courtyard, their spilled blood adding to the crimson of their uniforms. It caught to the hem of Leo’s robe too, but he did not slow, just hurried up the shallow steps and in through the open doors.

A tangle of silent passages and screened courtyards met us inside, the air cold enough to pimple my damp skin despite the heat of the day. Here too death had walked before us. Bodies had been left where they fell. Most looked to be servants, though there were a few guards and even a woman in fine silks arched backward over a stone seat, her hair and blood trailing into an ornamental pool.

Leo ignored them all and sped his pace, soon leading us out into the warmth of a large garden. From the city, the palace had looked to be a single building, but in truth it was two. One outer ring, like a secondary wall, shielding a smaller inner structure. It rose in the centre of the gardens like a spire, its many roofs like wings with which it might fly.

“The inner palace of Mei’lian,” Leo said in a beatific tone, his hands pressed together as though in prayer. I glanced back at my Swords. Yitti and Himi walked in front, their hands hovering ready. Trouble darkened both

their brows.

“Why did you want to come here?” I said, speeding my steps to keep up with Leo.

“Because this is where I have to be. Most likely that is because everyone else is here to capture the throne and Empress Miko.”

The golden warrior who danced with death. I hoped they wouldn't find her and felt foolish for the desire. She was not my empress. Not my herd master. Not my god.

Again Leo increased his pace, and like a stone swept upon a racing current, I followed.

Despite being locked away from the world, the inner palace was covered in ornamentation, in patterned wood and paint and hanging chains. Broad, shallow stairs led to double doors, both smashed in by the thick beam discarded in the doorway.

Dead soldiers filled the round space beyond the doors, the dying left to moan and bleed. One tried to speak to us, the last of his breath wasted on people who could not understand.

A heavy thumping came from above, and Leo climbed the stairs to a landing edged in a twisty metal. From the high ceiling, great lanterns hung on chains, their golden light falling upon wistful paintings and screens embroidered in tiny stitches. And upon still more bodies. They lay sprawled, a mess of fine robes and crimson surcoats.

The third landing was smaller again, and the view over its railing made my head spin. Never had I been in a building so tall it sought to emulate the mountains that ringed the world, but there were still more stairs. And more thumping. I could not understand the words carrying upon the echo, but Leo finally slowed as we reached the fourth landing.

Chiltaens and Levanti filled the space, while a dozen slaves battered at yet another pair of doors. They were great carved things that looked to have stood a thousand years, but like the rest of the city, they were breaking, pieces of lacquer shattering off with each blow like a swarm of black beetles crushed underfoot.

One door fell with a thud and blood poured through the opening. No—blood-coloured light. It touched all in its path as the Chiltaens hungered forward into the vaulted hall, Leo at the back of the silent mass of conquerors.

And at the far end of the room the golden empress sat proud upon her throne, a guard on either side all that was left to protect her.

Leo halted in the centre of the floor, but the Legate kept walking, speaking now with every step.

“He is asking her to surrender her empire,” Leo whispered to me. “He is telling her that her city has fallen. That her people will die. That there is no way left for her to fight. He is reminding her that when we took Koi we captured her mother, assuring her that they can be reunited if she surrenders.”

A small laugh sounded from deep within Leo’s throat. “They are good words,” he said, low enough that only I might hear him. “Sadly for Andrus, Empress Miko is too clever for him.”

“What do you—?”

Gideon stepped into the light before the throne, its red tinge seeming to stain him with blood. And having seen him, I looked around and saw Dishiva too, standing near the doorway. Captain Yiss en’Oht and Lashak e’Namalaka stood on either side of the room, the Levanti unheeded witnesses as the drama unfolded before us.

Legate Andrus gestured to his soldiers, and the two Kisian guards levelled their spears, but it was the empress who leapt from the raised platform and slid her blade into the first attacker’s neck. Without pause, she cut through slaves and soldiers alike with the skill of a master. One of her guards fell. Blood spread across the already crimson floor, but Leo did not move. Did not retreat. He held his ground before the oncoming whirl of golden death and began to laugh.

More Chiltaen soldiers piled in, and before I could take a second breath, a dozen lay dead upon the stones—the price to see the empress disarmed and surrounded. A foot to the back of her knees dropped her to the floor of her own throne room.

The legate tore the mask from her face, but it was a man who glared back, middle-aged and greying at the temples, his face bright red with exertion.

Lacquer shattered off the mask as it spun across the floor. Andrus snarled, gripping the man by the front of that golden armour and hissing in his face. The man did not answer. He just stared the legate in the eye as though daring his own death.



With a roar, the legate threw the gold-clad man to the floor and kicked him again and again, but still he got no answer. One right in the man's face earned him nothing but a hiss, and seething, Andrus began to pace before his soldiers, snapping orders at each in turn. At length the golden man was dragged away, and once again Leo translated in a low voice.

"He is ordering them to find Empress Miko. He wants every soldier to scour the city for her until she is found because she cannot have escaped. He is, as you can see, quite displeased."

"Who was the man?"

"He refused to say, but his thoughts betray him. He is Lord Ryo Manshin, minister of the left and heir to the throne. And he knows where the empress is. As do I."

A shiver ran through my skin. "What do you mean 'his thoughts betray him'?"

"I meant exactly what I said, Rah e'Torin." A little smile turned his lips. "His thoughts give him away the same as everyone else's. And they tell me it is time to say goodbye now, my friend. Thank you for getting me this far. I go the rest of the way alone."

Bidding me stay, Leo strode toward the throne. Catching sight of him, Andrus turned and made a flourishing bow, mock respect dripping from angry words.

Did they both want to claim it? My gaze darted from one to the other and then to Gideon, already standing beside the impressive throne.

Leaving the legate spitting fury, Leo stepped onto the dais and, with a satisfied little smile, lowered himself onto the Crimson Throne. As one, every Chiltaen bowed their heads, their hands pressed together in prayer.

Gideon drew his knife.

"No!" I leaped, only for hands to close about my arms and haul me back. "No! Plea—"

The blade plunged into the back of Leo's neck. The Chiltaens rushed forward as a screaming mass but Levanti were waiting, killing two before Gideon had even ripped his knife out of their god's chosen one. More Chiltaens fell, short scuffles ending with the bodies of our masters dead at Levanti feet.

Andrus fell last, blood spilling from his slit throat as Dishiva kicked him in the back, sending his corpse skidding along the ground.

Yitti and Himi let me go as Gideon hauled Leo off the throne, letting him fall from the dais like a discarded doll. “No, no!” I said, hurrying forward to press my hands to his face. “You can’t be dead. Bring him back. Bring him back!”

“You really care so much for him?” The quiet words came from the throne. Gideon sat upon it now, unchallenged, for only Levanti remained.

“He promised to release us,” I said, angry tears stinging my eyes. “He was going to let me take my Swords home.”

Behind me Himi gasped, but I had no eyes for her. I shook Leo’s broken body. His head lolled on its snapped neck. “Come back. Come back.”

“You would take freedom from him but not a new home from me?” Rage choked Gideon’s voice. “After everything I have done for you, you cradle the body of an enemy priest?”

“I must do what is best for my Swords and that means taking them home, Gideon. Home!” Tears streamed down my cheeks. “He would have let us go.”

“If you want freedom, then you have to take it, as I have taken it for all of us. From this moment, we are no longer slaves of the Chiltaens. We are not slaves of the Korune or the Tempachi or anyone else who would seek our destruction. We are Levanti and we shall forge our own empire, seeded with the blood of our enemies. Yiss, give the signal. Slaughter them all.”

“What?” I cried.

Gideon leant forward on the throne, his face contorted in a fury I had never seen, not even the night I had challenged his right to lead the herd. “Did you think I was ever really fighting for a Chiltaen conquest? Did you think I would ever give my life and the lives of my people for their gain? They won’t know what hit them. Trapped in this warren, they won’t even realise we have turned on them until it’s too late. The common Kisians will be spared. The Chiltaens butchered. That is my decree as Emperor Gideon of the first Levanti Empire.”

“Empire? This is madness!” I cried, looking from him to Dishiva and back. “We are nomads. Horsekin of the plains. We do not build cities and sit upon thrones. We do not hoard wealth or farm the land dry. We should not even be here!”

“But we are here and there is no going back,” he said. “We cannot win that war. We must leave the poisoned plains behind. The Kisians came to

this land on ships with nothing and built an empire. We can do the same, and you, Rah, are either with us or against us.”

I stared at the man sitting on the throne and willed myself to see the Gideon I had once known and admired, to see any trace of the man I had called brother. I wanted to believe him, to recognise him, to understand him, but all that sat there was pride and the scowl of a cold-blooded conqueror.

I pressed white-knuckled fists into a salute, desperate for anything that might remind him he was Levanti. “I am not against you, Brother,” I said, my fingers aching, so tightly did I grip them. “I have never been against you, but I cannot fight for what you are fighting for. I cannot abandon our ways. I want to go home, Gideon.”

My words ended on a plea, but he seemed not to hear me. Not to care. “This is your home now.” He nodded to Dishiva, and stepping over the bodies of Andrus and Leo, she gripped my arm.

“Don’t do this,” I said, closing my eyes as though it would make it all go away.

“Rah e’Torin,” Gideon spoke from the throne. “I hereby remove you from command of the Second Swords of Torin. Yitti will be their new captain, one willing to be a part of building our new home. Find him a cell, Dishiva.”

“What? Gideon, no, I—”

“Enough!” he cried as though the very sound of my words caused him agony. “Goodbye, Rah.”

Dishiva yanked the sword from my belt, and I did not fight her. Could not. Too numb to speak again, I let her push me toward the doors.

My Swords did not look at me as I was led away, did not fight for me, did not speak. Out in the city, the rest of the Levanti would be turning on their masters. They would be charging along the streets, hacking the heads from unsuspecting soldiers and loosing Chiltaen arrows into their makers. All they needed to do was blockade the gates and by nightfall the streets of Mei’lian would be choked with trapped souls.

At the prod of Dishiva’s hand, I walked out through the throne room doors, my soul heavy with regret and dread and sorrow. There had been a time when I had thought no worse fate existed than being lost to the gods in death, because until that moment I had never been lost to them in life.

**The story continues in...**

**WE LIE WITH DEATH**

**Book TWO of the Reborn Empire series**

**Keep reading for a sneak peek!**

## Acknowledgements

Wow it's that time again: time to panic over whether I've forgotten someone really important to thank. Eek!

To begin, I want to say a really huge thank you to my editor at Orbit US, Nivia Evans, not only for her belief in me, her tireless energy, her tricky questions, and her honesty, but for sending that second email when the first got eaten by the ether. If she hadn't, this version of this book wouldn't be here today.

Also an enormous thanks to my agent, Julie Crisp (whose first email also got eaten by the ether), for putting up with my mini freak-outs and answering sixty bazillion questions. You've been a wonderful support through this very strange journey, along with my agent sibling Sam Hawke, without whom this would all have been much harder. Here's to many, many years navigating the choppy waters of this industry together.

Thanks also to the rest of the Orbit team on both sides of the pond for all their hard work; I'm still getting to know many of you, so I won't make a list for fear of leaving out someone important, but I am so grateful to everyone who has put in any time on this book of mine in any capacity, because it really does take a little army of amazing people to make these things happen.

On that note, I want to thank Nicolas Delort for the beautiful piece of art that graces the cover of this book. When I made the move from self-publishing, I admit I was worried and didn't really want to change my cover because I loved the original, but it turns out I've been lucky enough to have two absolutely glorious covers for this book, and I couldn't be happier. The design team at Orbit have done a really amazing job pulling it all together, and I don't think I'll ever get tired of looking at it (and patting it and rubbing it against my cheek as I'M SURE ALL AUTHORS DO, RIGHT?),

but I would also like to take a moment to thank my original design team for their stunning work: John Anthony Di Giovanni for the beautiful artwork that brought Rah to life, Shawn King for taking that art and turning it into a wonderful cover, David Schembri for designing the original internal symbols for my point-of-view characters, and John Renehan for the original map that brought not only Kisia but Chiltae to life.

On the more personal side, enormous thanks must go to my best friend and original editor Amanda J. Spedding. She has worked tirelessly helping me perfect my prose and maintain my sanity. I really could never have hoped for a better person to work with if I'd tried. And even though she is no longer my editor, she's still stuck with me forever as a friend now, so ha!

Must also give a HUUUGGEE thanks to my discord fam, who are always there for me and always make me laugh, with special mention to a certain cabbage who shouted about this book so much when I self-published it. I'm not sure I'd be in this position now without him.

I would also like to thank Michael McClung for so aptly naming the first Otako for me over Twitter. Kylie Chan for her encouragement and the wonderful early input that made me look differently at the structure of Levanti society. Julia Kitvaria Sarene for answering endless questions about bows and archery and just generally being a source of online joy. And Belinda Crawford for making sure I didn't make an arse of myself with regard to horses.

Super thanks to Belle McQuattie for putting up with my nonsense and helping with everything from thinking up titles to keeping me from having an anxious meltdown. I'm truly fortunate in my friends, and for that I'll be forever grateful.

And above and beyond all others I must thank my partner, Chris, for his continued love and support, for taking the brunt of the Doom Toddler's (now Doom Child's) enthusiasm, and for fielding not only parental demands and housekeeping but my own tears and frustrations. He is the rock that weathers the raging stream and without him there would be no books.

Lastly, but certainly not least, I must thank all my readers, reviewers,

and fans. I would write my stories even if no one read them, but knowing that I'm not alone in my enjoyment of these worlds and these characters is the greatest joy an author can have. Thank you for your enduring enthusiasm and excitement. I plan to keep writing as many of these damn papery stories as I can for as long as I can, because there is nothing else I would rather do.

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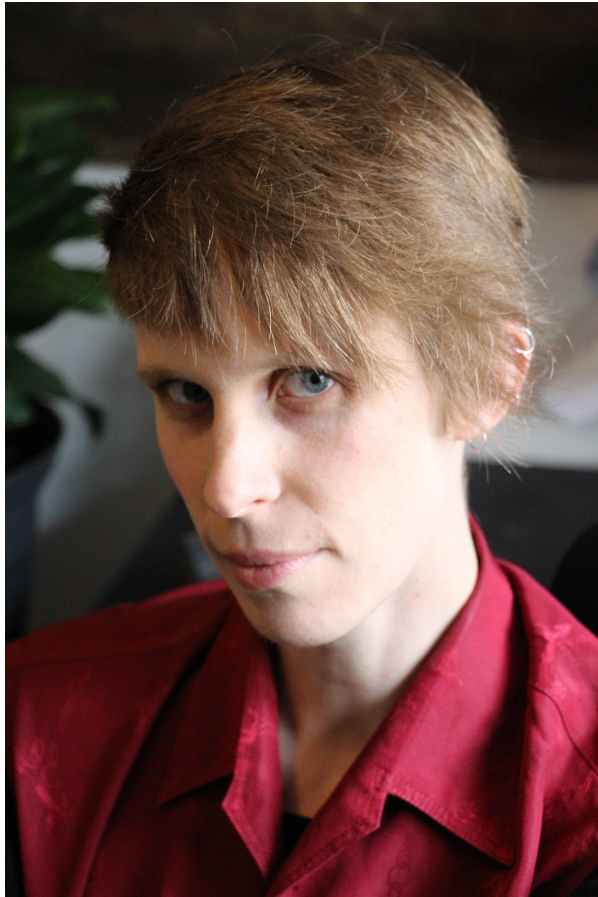




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## *meet the author*



*Photo Credit: Chris Magilton*

DEVIN MADSON is an Aurealis Award–winning fantasy author from Australia. After some sucky teenage years, she gave up reality and is now a dual-wielding rogue who works through every tiny side-quest and always ends up too over-powered for the final boss. Anything but zen, Devin subsists on tea and chocolate and so much fried zucchini she ought to have turned into one by now. Her fantasy novels come in all shades of grey and are populated with characters of questionable morals and a liking for witty banter.

## *interview*

### ***What was the first book that made you fall in love with the fantasy genre?***

This is always an interesting question because so many kids' books ARE fantasy, so gods only know which one cemented the magic in me. Like so many kids, I fell out of love with fantasy (or thought I did\*) when I started taking myself super seriously like a very grown-up twelve-year-old thank you very much, only to rediscover it in my mid-teens. Those rediscovery books were The Belgariad by David Eddings, a very common gateway series for my generation despite being older than me, and I had no sooner read them than I wanted to write my own fantasy books. Sadly I wouldn't go back to read those books again now (neither my early attempts nor The Belgariad) as I fear they wouldn't hold up to the nostalgia-tinted version I carry in my head.

\*It wasn't until much later I realised that in continuing to read the Redwall Series by Brian Jacques through my serious phase, I hadn't really grown out of fantasy at all. Oops.

### ***You started out in self-publishing. What has it been like transitioning from self-published to traditionally published? Does it change your creative process? If so, in what ways?***

Transitioning to traditional publishing has been wild. Lesson 1—you can't tell anyone anything. Lesson 2—you still can't tell anyone. Lesson 3—shhhh. There's a lot of keeping secrets on this side of the fence and having to sit on your exciting news for MONTHS, but you get used to it. And eventually when you CAN say something about the first exciting thing, you're at probably another exciting thing down the road. Seriously though, it's very different. As a self-publisher I had to not only write the books but work through the entire book production process, and while that was kind of fun the first few times it soon just became one more thing getting in the way of me writing all the books I had planned. Some people really love that business side of the job, but being able to rely on other people to do all that for me has been a huge

relief. I'm not sure how much it will ultimately affect my creative process as I've been stuck in revisions and edits since the contract was signed, but one thing I have noticed is the change in my mindset. Writing was always my job, but it was harder as a self-publisher to value the time I put into it as being on par with my partner's job, while now I value it and stake my claim to required work time with much more firmness. I wish I hadn't needed to make the leap to traditional publishing for that to be the case, but so it is.

***Where did the initial idea for We Ride the Storm come from and how did the story begin to take shape?***

Since *We Ride the Storm* takes place seventeen years after the end of the Vengeance Trilogy and in the same place, I always had a very vague idea that SOMETHING would be going on regarding Hana's daughter, Miko, I just didn't know what. But hey, I'm a massive pantsner and don't plot anything, especially in first books, so I just sat down to find out what would happen. Didn't know who the Levanti were, or Cassandra, but there's that blank page and I'd better think up a cool line to start on. And BAM we're severing heads and damn it's harder than we thought—so Rah and all the Levanti culture were born from the first line that came into my head. After that I just rolled with it (severed head pun absolutely intended).

***What was the most challenging moment of writing We Ride the Storm?***

You'd think it would be some of the emotional parts and the losses that are suffered and the struggles of my characters, but honestly even when those things make me cry, I love them. They aren't hard. The most challenging thing about writing *We Ride the Storm* was working on the cadence of every action scene over and over again until I was satisfied with it, because they are some of the hardest scenes to write in terms of pacing and movement and sentence structure. And unlike the more forgiving sections of description and dialogue, you can't mess them up. (Sex scenes are even worse because you really REALLY can't lose your readers in one of those because a sentence has one too many syllables.) Also finding myself writing a lot about horses, and about people who know a lot about horses, when I know nothing at all about horses, was a

whole other thing.

***We Ride the Storm is written in first person and alternates between three characters. Why did you choose to tell the story this way?***

I love first person. I know a lot of people don't because sometimes first-person narratives can become too internal and bogged in thoughts, but I love the closeness of it and the honesty it forces on characters. Honesty of expression and experience, not true honesty of story because there's always an element of the unreliable narrator in first person. They are telling you their side of the story and it's filtered through their ideas and their culture and their dreams, not told to be unbiased. I also love the depth of voice it allows me to use, not merely as a narrator, but as a method of further deepening the character development because the narrative voice *is* the character's voice. Why three alternating points of view? The story was too big for any less and by having three it allows me to clash those unreliable first-person narratives into each other, which is a hell of a lot of fun.

***The Kisian, Chiltaen, and Levanti cultures are incredibly well-developed and hint at rich histories waiting to be explored. How much detail do you plan out about your fictional cultures that never makes the page?***

A lot. Some of it is social conventions and religious practices that will never see the light of day, or the background of the occasional saying or name unique to an area, but most of it is history. History has always been my favourite part of world-building, probably because history is just more stories and stories are what I love. I have origin stories for almost all my characters, even the bit part ones, and there's a whole history on why Kisians and Chiltaens are so different yet live close enough to one another to share a spoken language but not a written one. I can even tell you all about the ice dragons the Ts'ai symbol was based on, and what kind of place is on the other side of the Kuro Mountains, and some of the history of the tribes that live on those mountains. I have started the sagas of people who live on the other side of the continent hundreds of years in the future and have started writing a non-fictional guide to the world's magic system. It helps that I've been writing in this world for a while, but a lot of it is just the effect of always wanting

more answers. Unfortunately I am terrible... TERRIBLE... at keeping all my notes in one place, so I really need to organise some kind of personal database before all of it goes missing... eek!

***The characters in We Ride the Storm are vibrant and compelling. If you had to pick one, who would you say is your favorite? Who did you find the most difficult to write?***

Cassandra is the *easiest* to write. Her snarky voice is pretty much just my inner monologue on steroids without the calming influence of my Hufflepuffy side (I think I gave all that to Rah...). She comes very naturally to the page and it makes writing her a joy. BUT, I don't think she's my favourite character. I very rarely have favourite characters in my own or other people's work because I'm here for the relationships between characters (whatever form those take). I don't watch The Lord of the Rings because I like Frodo or Sam, but because I love the relationship between Frodo and Sam (also Aragorn and Boromir, and despite tiny screen time only in the extended edition, Boromir and Faramir. Shhh, I'm odd, okay?). So, in that sense, my absolute favourite relationship here is between Rah and Gideon, and after them, between Cassandra and She/Her. The hardest to write is definitely Miko, because she is such a fine balance between ambition and morality, naivety and wisdom.

***Finally, without giving too much away, could you give us a hint of what happens in the next novel, We Lie with Death?***

Given the way *We Ride the Storm* ends, almost all the major factions and characters are left staring at the mangled remains of their grand plans and thinking "Well, shit, what are we going to do now?" and *We Lie With Death* falls into this odd space where almost everyone is starting on the back foot in terms of making bold moves and fielding big armies, but everyone is also REALLY PISSED OFF. So in a lot of ways it is a more personal book than its predecessor, a book for settling old scores and finding new paths, for questioning assumptions and having to make the very hardest of choices. It also contains a new point-of-view character, bringing the total to four, and the first complete explanation of my world's magic system to appear in any of my books. And head

chopping. Always more head chopping.

**If you enjoyed**  
**WE RIDE THE STORM**

look out for

**WE LIE WITH DEATH**

**The Reborn Empire: Book Two**

by

**Devin Madson**

*Into Kisia's conquered north, a Levanti empire is born.*

*Loyal to the new emperor, Dishiva e'Jaroven must tread the line between building a new life and clinging to the old. Only Gideon can lead them, but when he allies himself with a man returned from the dead, it will challenge all she thinks she knows and everything she wants to believe.*

*Now empress of nothing, Miko is more determined than ever to fight for her throne, yet with her hunt for allies increasingly desperate, she may learn too late that power lies not in names but in people.*

*Rah refused to bow to the Levanti emperor, but now, abandoned by the Second Swords, he must choose whether to fight for his people or his soul. Will honour be his salvation or lead to his destruction?*



*Sold to the Witchdoctor, Cassandra's only chance of freedom is in his hands, but when her fate becomes inextricably linked to Empress Hana's, her true nature could condemn them both.*

*There is no calm after the storm.*

# Chapter 1

## Rah

Time does not pass in darkness. There are no days to count. No nights to sleep. No sun to sear a path across the sky. In darkness you cease to exist as solitude wears your soul to a stub, but nothing could erode the truth in my heart. I was Levanti. A Torin. And this was not how a warrior of the plain died.

“Gideon!” I shouted, pressing my face to the bars. The echo of my voice bounced in the darkness, returning no answer. “Gideon!”

I gripped the bars, and sucking a deep breath through parched lips, began to sing our lament. We sang it for loss. We sang it for pain. We sang it beneath the stars and the scorching summer sun. We sang it when weak and we sang it when strong, but more than anything we sang it when we were alone. Gideon had taught me the words, along with a clutch of other children released from chores at the end of a travelling day. We had sat at his feet, fighting to sit closest as though his worn, sweaty boots were a shrine at which to pray.

“But what does it mean?” one of the others had asked—a child whose face and name had been lost to the haze of time, leaving only gratitude that someone else had asked so I need not look foolish.

“It’s a prayer,” Gideon had said, smiling at the foolish one. “In lifting your voice to the gods you will never be alone, because they will see you. Will hear you. Will honour you.”

He had ruffled the foolish one’s hair and left us staring after him. He might have been the Torin’s youngest Sword, just a child to the warriors he served with, but he had been like a god to us. To me.

When I finished, the song echoed on, bouncing back from the darkness

until at last it faded and silence returned.

Gideon did not come.



I dozed to be woken by my aching gut. Mere minutes might have passed, or whole hours. All I knew was hunger and thirst and darkness. My legs shook as I got to my feet, and I could not but think of our walk south, whipped and starved and shamed by the Chiltaens—Chiltaens later slaughtered by Levanti blades. Had Gideon released their souls? Or burned them like animals, head and all?

“Gideon!” My voice cracked, thirst cutting like razors into my dry throat. “Gideon!”

No answer came and I paced the length of the small cell, touching each of its bars in the darkness. Seventeen in all, each perfectly smooth, the six that made up the door slightly thicker than the rest. No light. No breeze. No life. Nothing but darkness, and like the gnawing in my gut, a fear began to eat at my thoughts. Had I been forgotten?

“Gideon! Yitti!”

Only echoes answered.



I did not hear footsteps, yet when I next opened my eyes I was no longer alone. Bright light pierced the bars and I winced, shuffling back across the floor until my shoulder blades hit stone.

“Sorry. I did not think.”

With a scrape of metal the light faded from noon-sun to gloaming.

“You look terrible.”

I laughed. Or tried to, but it came out as a wheeze and my stomach cramped. “You should have let me know you were coming so I could bathe,” I said, every word a dry rasp.

“At least being stuck down here hasn’t affected your sense of humour,” Sett said, his customary scowl coming into focus as my eyes adjusted. “I’m

not sure if—”

“I want to see Gideon.”

The only answer was the *tink tink* of the metal lantern growing hot, magnified by the silence. I let the words hang until at last Sett cleared his throat. “You can’t.”

“He cannot refuse to see me. I am a Sword of the Levanti. Of the Torin. I am—”

“He isn’t here, Rah.”

I stared at Sett’s harsh features as though at lines of script containing answers. “What do you mean he isn’t here? He’s gone home?”

Sett barked an explosive laugh that echoed along the passage. “No, he hasn’t gone home. He’s an emperor now, but it’s not exactly safe here, is it? The Chiltaens broke the city’s defences and why bother rebuilding them when your empire is north of the river, not south? This is enemy territory now.”

“Enemy—?”

“No more questions, Rah. You are the one going home.” A key scraped in the lock and, with a grunt of effort, Sett unlocked the door.

Home. I had wanted nothing else since arriving, yet I did not move toward freedom.

Sett folded his arms as best he could while still holding the lantern. “Really? After everything that’s happened you’re still going to be a stubborn ass?”

“We don’t kill. We don’t steal. We don’t conquer.” I raised my voice over his complaints. “And the only way to remove someone from leadership of their Swords is through challenge or death. I am Captain of the Second Swords of Torin until one of them challenges me for the honour.”

Sett growled, his fingers tightening upon the lantern’s handle. “Just go home, Rah. Go home.”

He turned then and, leaving the cell door wide open, started back along the passage. I followed the retreating light, my legs shaking. “Where are my Swords?”

“With Gideon,” Sett said, not stopping or slowing though I struggled to keep up, my feet dragging on the damp stone.

“What about Dishiva?”

“The same.”

“Leo?”

Sett stopped, turning so suddenly he almost swung the lantern into my face. “The Chiltaens’ God boy? Dead. You saw him die. His condition hasn’t improved.” Sett sighed. “Don’t do anything stupid, Rah. I know that’s hard for you, but this is your chance to escape this place, to go home, because if you give him trouble again, Gideon won’t have a choice but to —”

“To what?” I said as he started walking again, his swaying lantern leading the way like a drunken star. “To kill me?” I hurried after him. “Is that the new Levanti way? To kill those who question his decisions without challenge?”

Giving no answer, Sett started up a flight of stairs, each step a frustrated slam of boot on stone. I paused at the bottom to catch my breath, and nearly leapt from my skin as the fading light of Sett’s lantern lit the cell closest to the stairs. A man stood as close to the bars as he could get, staring at me, unblinking, in the manner of one committing my face to memory. I fought the urge to step back, to look away, though I was glad of the bars between us. Untidy strands of hair hung around his dirty face, but through the shroud of neglect, familiarity nagged.

Sett’s footsteps had halted on the stairs.

“Who is this?” I said, still not breaking my gaze from the man.

“Minister Manshin,” came Sett’s reply from the stairwell. “The man who was sitting on the throne in the empress’s battle armour when we arrived.”

Minister Manshin, who had taken the empress’s place to trick her enemies, now stared at me through the bars of his cell. I wanted to assure him I had never sought Mei’lian’s ruin, that I was not his enemy, but I had fought with my people against his and no amount of words could change that. Words he wouldn’t even understand.

“Come on,” Sett grumbled, and as his footsteps resumed, the light bled from Minister Manshin’s face. I unpinned myself from his gaze and mounted the stairs.

Sett climbed slowly, yet still I could not keep up, increasingly breathless and aching as each step renewed my body’s demands for food and water and rest. Had pride and anger not kept me stiffly upright, I would have

crawled on hands and knees.

When at last I reached the top I steadied myself with a hand upon the rough-hewn stone and sucked deep, painful breaths. Sett's footsteps continued on a way, only to stop and return when I didn't follow.

"I'm sorry I left you down there so long," he said, his face swimming before me. "I had no choice. You could only slip away unnoticed at night and I had to wait for Gideon to leave. There's food upstairs so you can eat before you go. And I've packed your saddlebags. Jinso is waiting in the yard."

*Jinso.* I had hardly let myself hope I would see him again, let alone be allowed to ride free, but anger overtook relief on its way to my lips. "You're smuggling me out of the city like an embarrassment."

"You could say that, yes. Can you walk again? Food isn't much farther."

The inner palace had changed. Once bright and filled with dead soldiers, it lay blanketed now in silence and shadows, turning its finely carved pillars into twisted creatures that lurked in every corner. Light bloomed behind paper screens and whispers met the scuff of our steps, but we saw no living soul.

Sett led me to a small chamber on the ground floor where a pair of lanterns fought back the darkness. A spread of dishes covered a low table, but my gaze was drawn to a bowl of shimmering liquid and, not caring if it was water or wine, I poured it into my mouth. It burned my throat like a ball of flame and I dropped the bowl, coughing.

"Kisian wine," Sett said over my coughs. "I think they make it from rice. Or maybe millet. There's tea, too, but don't drink it so fast. It's served hot."

"Why?" I managed, my voice even more strained than before.

"I don't know. When I find one that understands me, I'll ask them."

"Is there water?"

Sett examined the table. "Doesn't look like it. They aren't keen on water. They think it's dirty, and maybe it is here, I don't know." He shrugged, and then added in a sullen tone: "They don't cook whole animal either. That's dirty too, so instead they"—he waved his hand at the myriad of tiny dishes—"slice it all up very finely and ignore all the best parts. I saw one feeding the livers to some dogs."

Hunger and nausea warred in my stomach as I chose the most

recognisable hunk of meat and bit into it. It was heavily spiced and drowned in a strange, thick sauce, but hunger won and I crammed the rest into my mouth followed by another piece, and another. The sudden ingress of food made my stomach ache, but hunger kept me eating until I had filled its every corner.

While I ate and drank, trying not to slop the food down my already stained and stinking clothes, Sett stood by the door like a sentry. He didn't speak, didn't move, just stood with his arms folded staring at nothing, a notch cut between his brows.

Once my hunger had been crushed, nausea flared and I crossed my still-shaking arms over my gut. The sickly-sweet smell of the strange food clogged my nose and I sat back, hoping my stomach wouldn't reject it.

Only when the nausea had subsided a little did I say, "You're not really going to let me leave, are you?"

"You don't think so? You think I had Jinso saddled for someone else?"

I grunted and got slowly to my feet, still clutching my stomach. "You're really smuggling me out of the city in the middle of the night so no one sees me leave? What does he want people to think? That I'm dead? That he killed me?"

"He doesn't want people to think of you at all. You've caused too much trouble, Rah. Now it's time you listened. Leave Gideon alone. Leave Yitti alone. They've made their choices as have the rest of the Swords who want a new home and a better life."

"We already have a home."

"Then go fight for it!"

Silence hung amid the shadowed screens, a silence choked with dust and spiced food and the lingering scent of incense. I could taste the ghosts of another's life on every breath, an ever-present reminder of how far I was from home.

I eyed Sett. "Do I get my sword back?"

"And your knives if you want them. If you want a replacement for the sword you dropped in Tian, you'll have to put up with a Kisian blade. Hardly a matched pair, but it's all we have."

I wanted a Kisian sword as little as I wanted to eat their food, live on their land, or conquer their cities, but I nodded and something like a strained smile spread Sett's lips. "Come, we'll get you some fresh clothes."

We met no one on the way out, the inner palace like an empty tomb. The bodies might be gone, but broken screens and railings remained, and many doors were little more than apertures choked with tangled nests of wood and paper.

Stepping in through another door, Sett swung his lantern before him, revealing not an orderly room but a mess of weapons piled by type amid a sea of cloth and leather and chainmail vests.

“Most of it’s too small, but with a few cuts in the right places it’s wearable,” Sett said, sitting the lantern on a ransacked chest and picking up a green silk robe. “The Imperial army uniforms weren’t too bad, but most of those have gone.”

I wanted to wear Kisian clothes as little as I wanted to carry one of their swords, but my own leathers had seen more filth than I cared to think about. I had worn them into battle many times and the cooling blood of many severed heads had dribbled down my knees. Here, despite the disorder, everything was clean and crisp.

Sett tossed the robe at me and its threads caught on my rough skin as it slipped through my fingers. I let it fall and it pooled on the floor like the shimmering green waters of Hemet Bay.

Once more Sett stood silent as I made my way around the room, sorting through the scattered garments. The pants I chose were too loose, the tunic too long, the leather undercoat too thin, and the cloak too heavy. I needed clothes, but it all cut into my flesh in the wrong places and made my skin itch, and the closeness of the collar around my throat was like a choking hand. So many layers would boil one alive beneath the Levanti sun, but if the Kisian rains were half as bad as the Chiltaens believed then I’d be glad of them. The dreaded rains. If the Chiltaens had been less afraid of a little water, they might have noticed the coup brewing beneath their noses. Or not. I hadn’t, and Gideon was my blood.

I spread my arms, inviting Sett’s approval. “Well? How do I look?”

“Ridiculous. But clean. Now come on, it’ll be dawn soon.”

Having grabbed a replacement blade and bundled my own clothes into a bag, I once more followed Sett out into the inner palace’s silent shadows.

“Where is everyone?” I said, having to walk quickly to keep up.

“It’s the middle of the night. Where do you think they are?”

He stepped into the entry hall and though Sett was a tall man, he shrank



as the great height of the palace spire stretched away above him. His last words rose to the moonlit heights and his steps echoed as he crossed toward the open doors. No, not open. Broken. The Chiltaens had smashed the main doors like so many others, leaving Leo to stride through as though they had been opened by the hand of his god.

A stab of guilt silenced further questions. I had sworn to protect him and failed. Just as I had sworn to protect my Swords. And my herd.

Sett stepped through the broken doors like an ant sneaking between jutting teeth. Shallow stairs met us beyond and but for the smothering night I might have been walking along the colonnade behind Leo once again.

“What happened to Leo’s body?”

Sett didn’t turn his head. “I don’t know.”

“How do you not know?”

“I didn’t ask.”

He sped his pace, striding along the colonnade choked with the scent of rotting flowers we crushed beneath our feet. Beyond the tangle of vines the gardens spread away, while above the outer palace a shock of lightning lit the night sky. Inside had been airless and oppressive, but this was worse. Heat pressed in like a heavy hand, its damp touch sending sweat dripping down my forehead.

By the time Sett reached the outer palace I had to jog to catch up, an ache twinging my knees. “Sett—”

“Just walk, Rah, I have no more answers for you.”

Thunder rumbled as he hurried beneath a great arch and into the outer palace.

“Where are the First Swords?”

Sett did not answer. He walked on, outstripping my cramping gait by half a length each step, leaving me to scramble after him along dark passages and through twisting courtyards. His urgency made his lantern swing sickeningly, its handle creaking as light rocked to and fro upon the walls. Not that Sett seemed to need it. He knew the way. Leo had known the way, too.

I tightened my hold on the sack full of dirty armour and caught up with him. “Sett, tell me the truth,” I said. “What is going on?”

“Nothing. Look, just as I promised.” He gestured as we stepped once more into the night, the rush of his feet descending the outer stairs like the

clatter of a rock fall.

Jinso waited in the courtyard exactly as Sett had promised, young Tor e'Torin holding his reins. With Commander Brutus dead, the boy was as free as the rest of us, yet dark rings hung beneath his eyes and he stood tense.

“You were just supposed to give the instructions, not stay,” Sett said as he approached. “I need you inside to help with the messages. That scribe doesn’t understand half the words I say.”

“Sorry, Captain,” the young man said, pressing his fists together in salute. “I didn’t wish to leave Captain Rah’s horse alone in this strange yard with the weather so wild. He might have fretted.”

Sett grunted. “It’s not ‘Captain’ Rah anymore.”

I set my forehead to Jinso’s neck and tangled my fingers in his well-brushed mane, pretending not to hear though the words cut to my soul. Not a captain. The strange food in my stomach churned, bringing back the nausea.

In silence I checked Jinso over, more through habit than fear he had been poorly tended. Sett just stood, arms folded, watching, waiting, the scowl upon his face unvarying with each glance I risked his way. Tor had remained too, shifting foot to foot as though expecting at any moment to be sent away. He licked his lips and pressed them into a smile when he found me watching, but the smile didn’t even convince his lips let alone his eyes.

Thunder rumbled—distant still, but no less threatening. The crowding of clouds beginning to blot the stars from the sky made some sense of the Chiltaen fear.

My sword and knives had been stashed in one of the saddlebags—Kisian saddlebags, I noted—and though I wondered what had happened to my own, I could not force the question out. It seemed to congeal inside my mouth, glued by the creeping sense that something was very wrong.

“I could stay, you know,” I said, thrusting my sack of armour into one of the saddlebags and patting Jinso’s neck. “If you need me. You are my brother as much as Gideon.”

Sett laughed, its humourless sound sending a shiver through my skin. “Get on your horse, boy.”

I risked another glance at Tor, but the saddleboy stared at the stones as a fork of lightning lit his untidy length of black hair.

“All right,” I said, and saluted him as I would Gideon. “May Nassus guide your steps and watch over your soul.”

He made no reply, barely seemed to hear me. My legs twinged as I climbed onto Jinso’s back, but whatever weakness my body owned became nothing in that moment for I was a rider once more, Jinso’s strength inflating my soul. With his reins in my hands I could sit tall and proud despite weakness and doubt, despite guilt and fear and pain. In the saddle I was a Levanti.

“Ride north,” Sett said then, as though the restless clop of Jinso’s hooves woke him from his trance. “And don’t stop until you reach the Ribbon. When you get back—”

“I’m not going back,” I said. “Not yet. But I will ride north to catch up with Gideon.”

The snarl of a wounded animal tore from Sett’s lips and in two steps he had gripped Jinso’s bridle. “Don’t you ever fucking listen, Rah? Go! Get out of here.”

“I am still Captain of the Second Swords of Torin and I know my duty. I will not go home without them.”

Sett leaned in close, pressing my leg to Jinso’s side as he said, “That duty will get you killed.”

“Then it is my duty to die. I will follow them, whatever—” I bit down a howl as pain tore up my leg like lightning, mimicking the burning trails of fire that crazed the night sky. Sett’s scarred fist sat upon my thigh, the hilt of a knife peeping between his fingers.

“Consider this your last warning,” he said, leaning even closer. “Leave. Now.”

I tightened my grip upon Jinso’s reins until it hurt my hands, but it made no difference to the pain swelling in my leg. “No,” I said through gritted teeth. “If you want to stop me then you’ll have to kill me yourself.”

Sett twisted the blade, tripling the tearing pain in my thigh. I wanted to cry out, to sob like a child and retch my pain upon the stones, but I pressed my lips closed and breathed slowly. Beneath me Jinso tried to leap sideways and I fought hard to keep him still, to keep the blade from being ripped free.

“Leave this place,” Sett said, spitting the words like an angry snake. “You wanted to know where the rest of the First Swords are. Where the Second Swords are? They are all on the walls, waiting to fill your back with

arrows if you don't listen to me. So for the first time in your life, Rah, *listen*. Leave Gideon alone. Ride north. Ride fast. And don't look back."

He yanked the blade out and I sucked a gasp. The courtyard spun. Hot blood soaked my pants and dribbled down my leg, and smelling it, Jinso backed. Before I could calm him, a slap to his rear sent him plunging forward. His hooves clattered across the courtyard and all I could do was hold tight or fall.

The blur of the gates passed as we picked up speed, the effort of clinging on with my legs growing more painful with every stride. I was losing blood fast. The wound needed to be bound, needed to be sewn, but I had none of Yitti's skill and he... How many of my Swords had wanted me dead?

*Ride fast. And don't look back.*

The city passed in a haze of flickering lights and shadows. Unlike the palace the city was still alive, and people leapt aside with cries that mingled with the clatter of racing hooves.

The road from palace to northern gate was straight and broad, and Jinso followed it toward the brewing storm, its forks of lightning mirroring the spears of pain flaring behind my eyes. Past burned-out shells of once great buildings, past fountains and shrines and piles of the dead, past barricades and great trees that grew amid it all like hands reaching to the sky. And ahead the broken walls of Mei'lian appeared from the night like jagged mountains, its gate gaping open.

Jinso didn't slow and I let him have his head. Blood was pooling in my boot and I needed to bind it, but lights flickered atop the surviving sections of wall and I could not stop. Not yet. To die for duty was honourable. To be killed in the saddle by my own blood was not.

Head down, mane whipping, Jinso plunged through the broken gates and into the night. Darkness swallowed us, but we kept on without slowing. Every thud of hoof upon road seemed to burst still more blood from my wound, but I gritted my teeth in anticipation of arrows. My back tingled, waiting, sure the silent death would hit at any moment. Dread turned to hope with every racing step Jinso took along the moonlit road, until at last I dared to look back. A line of flickering torches lit the top of the wall like watching eyes—the watching eyes of every Levanti I had led to this cursed place. Every Levanti I ought to be taking home.

"Let's start with not bleeding to death and then—"

I turned back to the road and, as everything spun, fell headfirst to meet it.

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**THE THRONE OF THE FIVE**  
**WINDS**

**Hostage of Empire: Book One**

by

**S. C. Emmett**

*Six Princes. Two Queens. One Throne.*

*The imperial palace—full of ambitious royals, sly gossip, and unforeseen perils—is perhaps the most dangerous place in the Empire of Zhaon. Komor Yala, lady-in-waiting to the princess of the vanquished kingdom of Khir, has only her wits and her hidden blade to protect herself and her charge, who was sacrificed in marriage to the enemy as a hostage for her conquered people’s good behavior, to secure a tenuous peace.*

*But the Emperor is aging, and the Khir princess and her lady-in-waiting soon find themselves to be pawns in the six princes’ deadly schemes for the throne—and a single spark could ignite fresh rebellion*

*in Khir.*

## LITTLE LIGHT

Above the Great Keep of Khir and the smoky bowl of its accreted city, tombs rose upon mountainside terraces. Only the royal and Second Families had the right to cut their names into stone here, and this small stone pailai<sup>1</sup> was one of the very oldest. Hard, small pinpoints about to become white or pink blossoms starred the branches of ancient, twisted yeoyans;<sup>2</sup> a young woman in blue, her black hair dressed simply but carefully with a single white-shell comb, stood before the newest marker. Incense smoked as she folded her hands for decorous prayer, a well-bred daughter performing a rare unchaperoned duty.

Below, the melt had begun and thin droplets scattered from tiled roofs both scarlet and slate, from almost-budding branches. Here snow still lingered in corners and upon sheltered stones; winter-blasted grass slept underneath. No drip disturbed the silence of the ancestors.

A booted foot scraped stone. The girl's head, bowed, did not move. There was only one person who would approach while she propitiated her ancestors, and she greeted him politely. "Your Highness." But she did not raise her head.

"None of that, Yala." The young man, his topknot caged and pierced with gold, wore ceremonial armor before the dead. His narrow-nosed face had paled, perhaps from the cold, and his gaze—grey as a winter sky, grey as any noble blood-pure Khir's—lingered upon her nape. As usual, he dispensed with pleasantries. "You do not have to go."

Of course he would think so. Her chin dropped a little farther. "If I do not, who will?" Other noble daughters, their fathers not so known for rectitude as the lord of Komori, were escaping the honor in droves.

"Others." A contemptuous little word. "Servants. There is no shortage."

Yala's cloud-grey eyes opened. She said nothing, watching the

gravestone as if she expected a shade to rise. Her offerings were made at her mother's tomb already, but here was where she lingered. A simple stone marked the latest addition to the shades of her House—fine carving, but not ostentatious. The newly rich might display like fan-tailed baryo,<sup>3</sup> but not those who had ridden to war with the Three Kings of the First Dynasty. Or so her father thought, though he did not say it.

A single tone, or glance, was enough to teach a lesson.

Ashani Daoyan, Crown Prince of Khir newly legitimized and battlefield-blooded, made a restless movement. Lean but broad-shouldered, with a slight roundness to his cheeks bespeaking his Narikh motherblood, he wore the imperial colors easily; a bastard son, like an unmarried aunt, learned to dress as the weather dictated. Leather creaked slightly, and his breath plumed in the chill. "If your brother were alive—"

"—I would be married to one of his friends, and perhaps widowed as well." Now Komor Yala, the only surviving child of General Hai Komori Dasho, moved too, a slight swaying as if she wished to turn and halted just in time. "Please, Daoyan." The habit of long friendship made it not only possible but necessary to address him so informally. "Not before my Elder Brother."

"Yala..." Perhaps Dao's half-armor, black chased with yellow, was not adequate for this particular encounter. The boy she had known, full of sparkstick<sup>4</sup> pride and fierce silence when that pride was balked, had ridden to war; this young man returned in his place.

Did he regret being dragged from the field to preserve a dynasty while so many others stood and died honorably? She could not ask, merely suspect, so Yala shook her head. Her own words were white clouds, chosen carefully and given to the frigid morning. "Who will care for my princess, if I do not?"

"You cannot waste your life that way." A slight sound—gauntlets creaking. Daoyan still clenched his fists. She should warn him against so open a display of emotion, but perhaps in a man it did not matter so much.

"And yet." *There is no other option*, her tone replied, plainly. *Not one I am willing to entertain*. "I will take great care with your royal sister, Your Highness."

Of course he could not leave the battlefield thus, a draw achieved but no victory in sight. "I will offer for you."



“You already would have, if you thought your honored father would allow it.” She bowed, a graceful supple bending with her skirts brushing fresh-swept stone. “Please, Daoyan.” Her palms met, and her head dropped even farther when she straightened, the attitude of a filial daughter from a scroll’s illustrations.

Even a prince dared not interrupt prayers begun before a relative’s tomb. Daoyan turned, finally, boots ringing through thin snow to pavers she had not attended to with her small broom, and left the pailai with long, swinging strides.

Yala slipped her hands deeper inside her sleeves and regarded the memorial stone. Bai, of course, would have sniffed at the prospect of his little sister marrying a man with an honorless mother, no matter if he had proven himself in war and the Great Rider had legitimized him. Bai would also have forbidden her to accompany Mahara. He was not the clan-head, but since he came of age their father had let him take heavier duties and listened to his counsel. Bai’s refusal would have carried weight, and Yala could have bowed her head to accept it instead of insisting upon her duty as a noble daughter must before a distinguished parent.

Perhaps that would have been best. Was the cringing, creeping relief she would have felt cowardice? The other noble families were scurrying to keep their daughters from Mahara’s retinue, marriages contracted or health problems discovered with unseemly haste. The Great Rider, weakened as he was by the defeat at Three Rivers and the slow strangling of Khir’s southron trade, could not force noble daughters to accompany his own, he could only... request.

Other clans and families could treat it as a request, but Komori held to the ancient codes. It was a high honor to attend the princess of Khir, and Yala had done so since childhood. To cease in adversity was unworthy of a Komor daughter.

Burning incense sent lazy curls of scented smoke heavenward. If her brother was watching, he would have been fuming like the sticks themselves. A slow smolder and a hidden fire, that was Hai Komori Baiyan. She could only hope she was the same, and the conquering Zhaon would not smother her *and* her princess.

*First things first. You are to pay your respects here, and then to comfort your father.*

As if there could be any comfort to a Khir nobleman whose only son was dead. Hai Komori Dasho would be gladdened to be rid of a daughter and the need to find a dowry, that much was certain. Even if he was not, he would act as if he were, because that was the correct way to regard this situation.

The Komori, especially the clan heads, were known for their probity.

Her fingertips worried at her knuckles, and she sighed. “Oh, damoi,<sup>5</sup> my much-blessed Bai,” she whispered. It was not quite meet to pronounce the name of the dead, but she could be forgiven a single use of such a precious item. “How I wish you were here.”

She bent before her brother’s grave one last time, and her fingers found a sharp-edged, triangular pebble among the flat pavers, blasted grass, and iron-cold dirt. They could not plow quite yet, but the monjok<sup>6</sup> and yeoyan blossoms were out. Spring would come early this year, but she would not see the swallows returning. The care of the pailai would fall to more distant kin from a junior branch of the clan.

Yala tucked the pebble in a sleeve-pocket, carefully. She could wrap it with red silken thread, decorate a hairstick with falling beads, and wear a part of both Bai and her homeland daily. A small piece of grit in the conqueror’s court, hopefully accreting nacre instead of dishonor.

There were none left to care for her father in his aging. Perhaps he would marry again. If Bai were still alive...

“Stop,” she murmured, and since there were none to see her, Yala’s face could contort under a lash of pain, a horse shying at the whip. “He is not.”

Khir had ridden to face Zhaon’s great general at Three Rivers, and the eldest son of a proud Second Family would not be left behind. The battle had made Daoyan a hero and Bai a corpse, but it was useless to Khir. The conquerors had dictated their terms; war took its measure, reaping a rich harvest, and Zhaon was the scythe.

Khir would rise again, certainly, but not soon enough to save a pair of women. Even a cursory study of history showed that a farm could change hands, and he who reaped yesterday might be fertilizer for the next scythe-swinging. There was little comfort in the observation, even if it was meant to ease the pain of the defeated.

For the last time, Yala bowed before her brother’s stone. If she walked slowly upon her return, the evidence of tears would be erased by the time

she reached the foot of the pailai's smooth-worn stairs and the single maidservant waiting, holding her mistress's horse and bundled against the cold as Yala disdained to be.

A noblewoman suffered ice without a murmur. Inside, and out.

Hai Komori's blackened bulk rested within the walls of the Old City. It frowned in the old style, stone walls and sharply pitched slate-tiled roof; its great hall was high and gloomy. The longtable, crowded with retainers at dinners twice every tenday, was a blackened piece of old wood; it stood empty now, with the lord's low chair upon the dais watching its oiled, gleaming surface. Mirrorlight drifted, brought through holes in the roof and bounced between polished discs, crisscrossing the high space.

Dusty cloth rustled overhead, standards and pennons taken in battle. There were many, and their sibilance was the song of a Second Family. The men rode to war, the women to hunt, and between them the whole world was ordered. Or so the classics, both the canonical Hundreds and supplements, said. Strong hunters made strong sons, and Yala had sometimes wondered why her mother, who could whisper a hawk out of the sky, had not given her father more than two. Bai the eldest was ash upon the wind and a name upon a tablet; the second son had not even reached his naming-day.

And Komor Madwha, a daughter of the Jehng family and high in the regard of the Great Rider and her husband as well, died shortly after her only daughter's birth.

Komori Dasho was here instead of in his study. Straight-backed, only a few thin threads of frost woven into his topknot, a vigorous man almost into the status of elder sat upon the dais steps, gazing at the table and the great hearth. When a side door opened and blue silk made its subtle sweet sound, he closed his eyes.

Yala, as ever, bowed properly to her father though he was not looking. "Your daughter greets you, *pai*."

He acknowledged with a nod. She waited, her hands folded in her sleeves again, faintly uneasy. Her father was a tall man, his shoulders still hard from daily practice with saber and spear; his face was pure Khir. Piercing grey eyes, straight black hair topknotted as a Second Dynasty

lord's, a narrow high prow of a nose, a thin mouth, and bladed cheekbones harsh as the sword-mountains themselves. Age settled more firmly upon him with each passing winter, drawing skin tighter and bone-angles sharper. His house robe was spare and dark, subtly patterned but free of excessive ornamentation.

He was, in short, the very picture of a Khir noble—except he was not, as usual, straight as an iron reed upon his low backless chair with the standard of their house—the setting sun and the komor flower<sup>2</sup>—hung behind it.

Finally, he patted the stone step with his left hand. “Come, sit.” His intonation was informal, and that was another surprise.

Yala settled herself, carefully. With her dress arranged and her feet tucked to the side, she lowered her eyelids and waited.

Lord Komori did not care for idle chatter.

The great hall was different from this angle. The table was large as it had been when she was a child, and the cavernous fireplace looked ready to swallow an unwary passerby whole. The braziers were blackened spirit-kettles, their warmth barely touching winter's lingering chill. Flagstones, swept and scrubbed even when winter meant the buckets formed ice which needed frequent breaking, stared blankly at the ceiling, polished by many feet. Yala stilled, a habit born of long practice in her father's presence.

*The mouse that moves is taken.* Another proverb. The classics were stuffed to bursting with them.

As a child she had fidgeted and fluttered, Dowager Eun despairing of ever teaching her discretion. In Yala's twelfth spring the weight of decorum had begun to tell, and she had decided it was easier to flow with that pressure than stagger under it. Even Mahara had been surprised, and she, of all the world, perhaps knew Yala best.

After Bai, that was.

“Yala,” her father said, as if reminding himself who she was. *That* was hardly unusual. The sons stayed, the daughters left. An advantageous marriage was her duty to Komori. It was a pity there had been no offers. *I wonder what is wrong with me*, she had murmured to Mahara once.

*I do not wish to share you with a husband*, Mahara answered, when she could speak for laughing.

“Yes.” Simple, and soft, as a noblewoman should speak. She wished she were at her needlework, the satisfaction of a stitch pulled neatly and

expertly making up for pricked fingers. Or in the mews, hawk-singing. Writing out one of the many classics once again, her brush held steady. Reading, or deciding once more what to pack and what to leave behind.

She wished, in fact, to be anywhere but here. After a visit to the ancestors, though, her presence at her father's wrist was expected. Brought back to endure scrutiny like a hawk itself, a feather passed over her plumage, so as not to disturb the subtle oils thereupon.

"I have often thought you should have been born male." Komori Dasho sighed, his shoulders dropping. The sudden change was startling, and disturbing. "You would have made a fine son." Even if it was high praise, it still stung. A formulaic reply rose inside her, but he did not give her the chance to utter as much. "But if you were, you would have died upon that bloodfield as well, and I would have opened my veins at the news."

Startled, Yala turned her head to gaze upon his profile. The room was not the only thing that looked different from this angle. The thunder-god of her childhood, straight and proud, sat beside her, staring at the table. And, terrifyingly, hot water had come to Komori Dasho's eyes. It swelled, glittering, and anything she might have said vanished.

"My little light," he continued. "Did you know? I named you thus, after your mother died. Not aloud, but here." His thin, strong right fist, the greenstone seal-ring of a proud and ancient house glinting upon his index finger, struck his chest. "I knew not to say such things, for the gods would be angry and steal you as they took *her*."

Yala's chest tightened. A Lord Komori severe in displeasure or stern with approval she could answer. Who was *this*?

Her father did not give her a chance to reply. "In the end it does not matter. The Great Rider has requested and we must answer; you will attend the princess in Zhaon."

*This much I knew already.* The pebble in her sleeve-pocket pressed against her wrist. She realized she was not folding her hands but clutching them, knuckles probably white under smooth fabric. "Yes." There. Was that an acceptable response?

He nodded, slowly. The frost in his hair had spread since news of Three Rivers; she had not noticed before. This was the closest she had been to her father since... she could not remember the last time. She could not remember when he last spoke to her with the informal inflection *or* case,

either. Yala searched for something else to say. "I will not shame our family, especially among *them*."

"You—" He paused, straightened. "You have your *yue*?"

*Of course I do.* "It is the honor of a Khir woman," she replied, as custom demanded. Was this a test? If so, would she pass? Familiar anxiety sharpened inside her ribs. "Does my father wish to examine its edge?" The blade was freshly honed; no speck of rust or whisper of disuse would be found upon its slim greenmetal length.

"Ah. No, of course not." His hands dangled at his knees, lax as they never had been in her memory. "Will you write to your father?"

"Of course." As if she would dare *not* to. The stone under her was a cold, uncomfortable saddle, but she did not dare shift. "Every month."

"Every week." The swelling water in his eyes did not overflow. Yala looked away. It was uncomfortably akin to seeing a man outside the clan drunk, or at his dressing. "Will you?"

"Yes." *If you require it of me.*

"I have kept you close all this time." His fingers curled slightly, as if they wished for a hilt. "There were many marriage offers made for you, Yala. Since your naming-day, you have been sought. I refused them all." He sighed, heavily. "I could not let you go. Now, I am punished for it."

She sat, stunned and silent, until her father, for the first and last time, put a lean-muscled, awkward arm about her shoulders. The embrace was brief and excruciating, and when it ended he rose and left the hall, iron-backed as ever, with his accustomed quiet step.

*He is proud of you,* she had often told Bai. *He simply does not show it.*

Perhaps it had not been a lie told to soothe her brother's heart. And perhaps, just perhaps, she could believe it for herself.

**By Devin Madson**

**THE VENGEANCE TRILOGY**

*The Blood of Whisperers*

*The Gods of Vice*

*The Grave at Storm's End*

**THE REBORN EMPIRE**

*We Ride the Storm*

1 A single family's tombs.



2 A tree similar to a cherry.

[3](#) Carrion-eating birds with bright plumage, often kept as garbage-eating pets.

4 A handheld firework.

5 *Khīr*. *Affectionate*. Elder brother.

[6](#) A small, slightly acrid fruit.

[Z](#) A native, very hardy Khir plant with seven petals on its small highly fragrant flowers; the root is used for blue dye.