

A TALE OF HAYARA

Book One

RISE OF THE PHOENIX

Table of Contents

Part I	2
Chapter One	2
Chapter Two.....	8
Chapter Three	19
Chapter Four	27
Part II.....	34
Chapter Five	34
Chapter Six	43
Chapter Seven	49
Chapter Eight	56
Chapter Nine.....	78
Chapter Ten.....	94
Part III.....	100
Chapter Eleven.....	100
Chapter Twelve.....	115
Part IV	134
Chapter Thirteen.....	134
Chapter Fourteen.....	155
Chapter Fifteen.....	161
Chapter Sixteen.....	174
Chapter Seventeen.....	192
Chapter Eighteen	207

Part V.....	220
Chapter Nineteen.....	220
Chapter Twenty	232
Chapter Twenty-One.....	259
Chapter Twenty-Two.....	270
Chapter Twenty-Three.....	276
PART VI.....	287
Chapter Twenty-Four	287
Chapter Twenty-Five	292
Chapter Twenty-Six.....	305
About the Author	318
Books in this Series	319
Acknowledgements.....	320
Chapter 1.....	321
Suggested Reading	334

A Tale of Hayara Series

Prequel: Blood of the Pheonix

Book 1: Rise of the Phoenix

Book 2: Child of the Phoenix

Book 3: Fall of the Phoenix

(Companion: Mark of the Phoenix)

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A Tale of Hayara

Book One

Rise of the Phoenix

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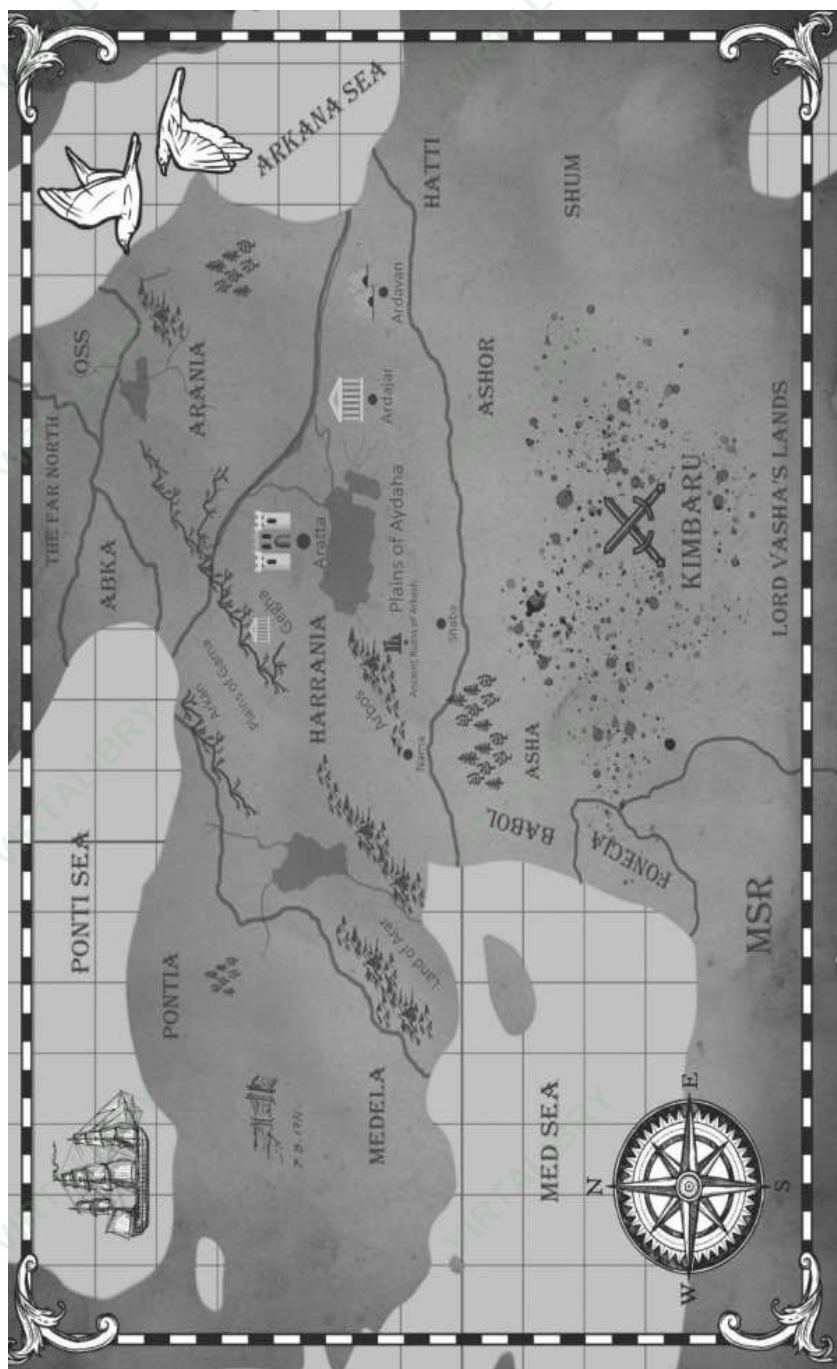
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To my mother,
Who instilled a love of Armenian history in me,
As well as my daughter,
Within whom I hope to ignite the same love for
Books, history,
And everything Armenian.



Glossary

Anoushs: My Sweet

Arka: King

Che: No

Dhol: Armenian Drum

Dakhanavar: Armenian equivalent to a vampire

Hokis: My Soul

Hokyag: My Little Soul

Kaghtsr: Sweet

Nani: Grandmother

Peri: Fairy

Sers: My Love

Sirds: My Heart

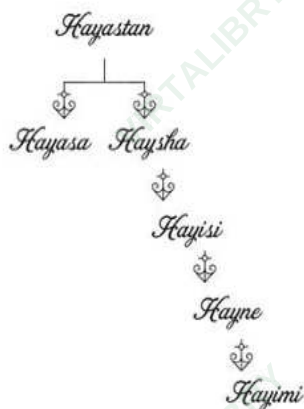
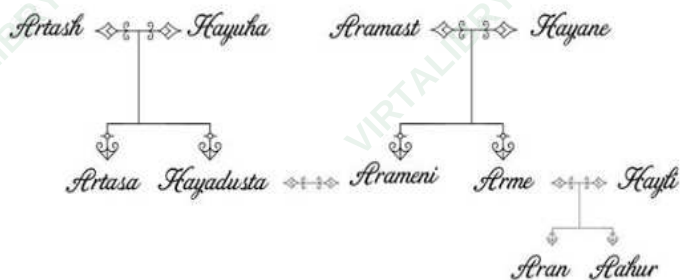
Sirum Em Kez: I Love You

Siruns: My Beauty

Takouhis: My Queen

Zurna: Armenian Wind Instrument

Family Tree



Part I

Chapter One

Oracle



"Fire will rise from the earth, water will pour from the sky, the ground will shatter in two, and gods will be reborn. Blazing birds will mate, and metal bells shall call out to the Heavens as a child is born to take the throne of obsidian and gold."

Time had taken its toll on her. It had not been kind to her once smooth limbs and laughing eyes. Haya's Temple was built upon a mountain with steep slopes and a flat peak. Grapes grew in abundance in this remote region of their world, where not even the most devout of pilgrims dared to travel. She was one of the few who trekked the steps of the sacred temple, sometimes trailed by her cheeky young granddaughter.

Inhaling the musky scent of nature, strange sensations rippled within, bringing life into aging muscles. Her body needed no adornments, bared to the glory of the sun. Hair fell far below her waist, tendrils of spun silver where there was once gold against her sun-kissed skin, braided into twin ropes that hung heavy down past her navel and grazed her thighs. Glassy eyes reflecting the heavens stared across the horizon, turned to another world full of Haya's sunshine and warmth. The freedom of her sanctuary gentled her burdened heart, bringing light to sightless eyes.

"A daughter you shall have, oh Great Mother. You will see your children suffer great pains, and you will watch them rise from the ashes. Such beauty I foresee in this child you will bear. Yet, much sorrow will follow in her wake."

"What do you say so solemnly, grandmother?" asked a little voice from behind one of the carved obelisks adorning the area. The voice echoed as only a child's could. Small and sweet, high in pitch.

"Hayimi! What are you doing here, my love? How did you manage the climb alone?" Groping for her granddaughter of nine summers, Hayisi muttered under her breath as she turned toward the holy aura of a priestess-in-training.

"I had to see you, Nani. I had a dream I have to tell you about. And you know I can climb this mountain better than anyone," Hayimi responded with pride, her usually playful demeanor sobered considerably, much to Hayisi's dismay.

"What did you see, *hokyag*, my soul?"

"Fire came from the horizon, an inferno. It destroyed all in its path. The mountains were bleeding fire, Nani. The sky was red. There was nothing left alive. The gods feared the inferno, as well. I could not breathe in the fire. There was a man, however. He was not very tall but very dark, staring into the fires, unburnt. Like a guardian to something precious. Seeking revenge, I think. His eyes woke me up. Nani, he wasn't human but had a human body. He was more than a man. Not how a man should be. I was afraid, though I knew without a doubt he was protecting someone I would

want safe. I wasn't safe, though, Nani. And you were not around." Her voice was low, just above a whisper as she choked back sobs while Hayisi gathered the child into comforting arms.

Infernos, the High Priestess thought. Fire from the heavens. This cannot bode well for any of us.

"Did you see anything else, *sers*?"

"I woke up screaming as the fire touched me. I do not know if there was anything else, but my heart was beating so fast I could feel its pulse everywhere."

Soothing her granddaughter with soft pats and touches, Hayisi remained quiet as she waited for more.

"A child, Nani. One child?" She paused, thinking it over. "I cannot remember. But he is connected to a child."

"One that already draws breath?"

"I do not know. But I do not think so."

"Did you see when?"

She shook her head. "Perhaps if we knew who he was? Nani, it frightens me. You were not there!" Hayimi raised her voice, at last, as if fighting against her own conclusions about what that could mean. Hayisi was still young and believed she had many summers yet to live. Haya would not be so cruel as to call her away so soon, leaving her little one to the mercy of the world, would she?

"You saw what is to come, *sers*. We might not survive the inferno that is already blazing toward us. This protector must be created, however. And we must ensure the daughter of Haya is born. It is clear, *hokyag*. I, too, have been seeing visions. Prophecies invade my mind."

"Like the one you were mumbling about earlier, Nani?"

"Yes, little one. I am charged with this duty, and now so are you. It must be why I was not there in the end. We might not survive what is to come. Be it as the goddess wills. She will watch over us before calling us to her bosom. Never be afraid of death, *hokyag*."

There is only an eternity I see serving our goddess in what comes after."

Hugging her grandmother close, Hayimi visibly swallowed. "Do you think we will survive this inferno, Nani? We will lose much. I can feel it."

Such a chilling thought for a child, Hayisi mused. There was an old soul in her little crane.

"It might go either way. It matters not which. We must find the protector."

"But the man is a stranger. We are the children of Haya and Ar, fair in our features, the sky brightening our eyes. This is how you have always described us. This man... he was dark in every way. Not black, but even his skin was like a peasant's. Darker even. His hair, his eyes. Even his heart seemed to overflow with darkness, consumed by anger. When he looked at me, I saw hatred reflected back. Why would this man hate me, Nani?"

"I do not know, *hokyag*. Perhaps it was not you he looked upon."

She paused, considering.

"What is he?"

Thinking to herself, Hayisi wondered. A blessing from the gods?

"Did you see blood on his lips, by any chance?"

"Yes, I almost had the feeling he enjoyed the taste of the blood," she said, Hayisi feeling her shivering in disgust at the thought.

"Perhaps he enjoyed killing his enemies?"

"By drinking their blood?" The child shook her head, her youth apparent despite her wisdom and words spoken like a woman twice her age. Her young protégé had found nothing as distasteful as war and bloodshed, Hayisi knew.

"A *dakhanavar*," the elder proclaimed.

The young one's confusion was palpable.

"Creatures of lore who feasted on the blood of their enemies, with the strength of a hundred men and the sympathy of none. The only reason rulers sought to create such weapons was for their loyalty. A *dakhanavar* obeys the master for which it was created. This is the darkest of magic you can think of, however. It baffles me that Haya demands such a creature's existence."

"Do you think he hated me so much because we will create him? He was more than human." Hayimi could hear the lips being picked at. A true child at that moment. "You can create him, I think, because of your power. Right? Maybe I will be able to one day. I would like to learn, Nani! You can do it, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"No power comes without a price, though... you taught me that. Especially when this type of deeper, darker magic... It will kill you to create him!" The child's voice quickened in horror as that final realization dawned.

"I will die creating a protector," Hayisi whispered. "Haya truly is merciful, then."

"No!"

"We cannot yet tell for sure, but yes, my little one. You know what our purpose is in this life."

An obsidian blade could have sliced the tension. Hayimi tried to stifle sobs against the injustice of it all.

"Now, I must find this dark man of whom you dreamed," Hayisi spoke slowly but clearly, hoping to make her young successor understand the gravity of their position.

"You will die!"

The older woman smiled lovingly, imagining her granddaughter's distress bringing a darker gleam to bright blue eyes and a flush to alabaster cheeks. "I have lived long enough, *hokyag*. If our Mother calls us back to her womb now, who are we to refuse such a blessing?"

The soft rebuke did not go unnoticed.

"I know, Nani. I am being selfish when I should think of Haya first. As a priestess, I cannot be selfish."

"You are thinking as any other would. The thought of your parting from my side would distress me greatly as well, my little crane."

Silence stretched between them, the wind picking up only to die down once more. A balm against chapped cheeks. Songs of birds flying overhead caught her attention as the words sank in, sightless eyes upon the young one before her, tracing the shadows.

"Do you know where to find him?" she asked hedgingly.

A slight frown etched across Hayisi's thin lips. "Che, *hokyag*. I haven't a clue yet where to begin."

Deep in thought, Hayimi reached into her young mind, trying to pull forth images neatly tucked away. Deciphering dreams and visions had always been one of her granddaughter's strongest skills. "He was of our people," she finally said. "I am sure of this."

"Yet he was dark?"

"Yes. He appeared a prince of the night... very... royal."

"Royal... Dark, royal, and of our people?"

"He bore a mark on his arm, I believe."

"A mark?" Hayisi's eyes widened as something tickled at her senses; something she had long forgotten, or at least hoped to forget. "What sort of mark?"

Thinking hard, Hayimi tried to recall the image of the man. "A dark swirl of some sort."

Suddenly, excitement pushed Hayisi to her feet, and a single memory sprung to mind. A memory that should not have been forgotten. "Did the dark swirls resemble the sun's rays bending in a circular fashion, by any chance?"

Bewildered, the child replied, "Possibly so."

"My memory might be fading, but this I cannot forget. The former king of Harrania had a second son after King Arameni. The child was removed from sight and believed to be the product of an affair, not the seed of Aramast. I tended to the queen when he was born and saw the babe only once after he was branded a bastard prince, and I was forced to spirit him away. Perhaps his darkness was not because of an affair, but a manner by which to recognize a warrior in the service of Haya and Ar. I always knew the babe would be special. My sacrifice was for a reason."

"Another prince!"

"Yes, a second son."

"Why do we not know of him?"

"Some do. He is but a rumor for most, though."

"Why? That is sad."

"A tale for another day, little crane."

Hayimi fidgeted where she stood, eyes on the elder before her.

"How old would he be now?"

"He was born quite some time ago, perhaps twenty-eight summers. He was but a moon span old when branded with the hot ashes. The king was out of his mind with jealousy and could not bear to look at the boy. It was such an unfortunate affair, and I will never forget the queen's tear-stained face, nor her begging for mercy as they took her away. I disappeared with the babe that night, finding him a home. It was my promise to the queen that kept him alive. King Aramast never found the boy because of me. Last I heard, over ten summers back, he had taken a wife and must have borne at least one child by now." Hayisi thought aloud as images of using her powers to cloak the child's essence from murderous intent bombarded her mind.

"Where would he be now?"

"To the south, I believe," Hayisi stated as she remembered the family to whom she had entrusted the boy, protecting the child

scorned by their world.

"Then we must travel south."

"Che, *hokyag*. I must travel south."

"You cannot go alone!"

"I must."

"I saw the dream!"

"Yet, I am the one with the power to create who he must be. You know this."

"If I am there, I might be able to help you."

Hayimi tried to stand her ground, small fists by her side. She had power as well and hated being left behind.

"You would only place yourself in danger, *sers*. You are needed here, to tend to the vineyard."

"You will make an orphan of me, Nani," muttered a somber Hayimi.

"I understand your fears, child, and I will do my utmost to remain alive. However, you have your own task at hand. The secrets of our goddess will be revealed in due time. Our Mother has spoken, and I must oblige her. The beast must be created to ensure the salvation of our people."

Over the next few days, Hayisi felt her granddaughter watch with sad eyes as she prepared the herbal mixture which had the power to make a beast out of man. Her strength would not last once she transferred it through the peculiar broth to the prince who would curse the gods forevermore. Protecting the same man when he was but a child had cost the priestess her vision. This time, it would almost certainly cost her life.

But Haya had forged the path. Her daughters would now walk through the thicket with pride. And so, the journey began.

Chapter Two

Prince



It had taken a few days, but she'd finally found him. Hayisi watched, the shadows playing before her eyes as the young man lifted a child over his head and settled the small wriggling body on his shoulders. She watched with sightless eyes as he grinned, running down the hill with the laughing little boy bouncing on his back. It was a strange sensation to feel the auras, to almost envision in the dark what the father and child looked like. Yet somehow, she knew. A rather intriguing response to the lack of light in her eyes, a gift given despite the sense taken by Haya. She knew he was dark, though the boy had a much lighter countenance. She could clearly feel, and as such, see, the person standing there, even if she were blind to the rest of the world. There was power in that soul, though the child was intriguing, as well. Hayisi wondered how the future would play out for this family and felt a twinge of sadness for the trials they would soon face.

There were details that evaded the priestess's unique vision, however. The man had black mid-length locks streaming behind him as he ran, in stark contrast to his son's golden waves. Rippling muscles pulsed under his skin and his face bore the look of a peasant content with life. No expensive cloth graced his figure, bound instead in curious local garments of fur and loose linen.

There were designs embroidered onto the sleeveless fabric, images reminiscent of the brand on his arm that stood out against darkened skin, the sacred symbol of the sun as eight lines curved beautifully to create an eternal cycle. Her memory of this filled in the details. The embroidery on his clothes included waves to resemble the steady stream, and it looked as if the sun set into the waters as he moved around. Strangely, the man seemed an outcast in the mix of father and son, an older soul buried in a younger body; Hayisi caught wisps of this as she tried to decipher his aura. It had been so long since she had seen the prince. Life seemed to radiate from him, though it was coupled with a strange darkness that chilled her to her bones. He was the one.

The scent in the air was that of the countryside, with the summer months scorching the fields, the wheat ready for the harvest, the grass giving off a mild odor both fresh and pungent. Smiling, Hayisi took a moment to enjoy the marvels of nature, her senses running free with the gentle wind around her. The breeze seemed to take on a certain rhythm, pulsating with the energy emanating from each individual before her. It was as if it whispered in wonder about how a forsaken child had grown into a man, a condemned prince in the guise of a pauper risen above his fate. The moment was peaceful, but the ripples in the air bore a terrible omen. She would need to work fast.

Within a few moments, she knew he had seen her. She felt the shift in his aura, felt the wariness as the man kissed his son one last time before ordering the child home to help his mother and turned to meet the unusual intruder in his life. She sensed his deep love for country, for the life he had been forced to live. A prince he may be, but it was a commoner's heart he possessed. She didn't doubt for a moment that he would willingly give up a rich palatial world for the one he currently enjoyed, a place where he was king in his own right, ruling over nature and letting nature rule over him.

She knew him. The knowledge suddenly flooded in. She knew what was to come and the drastic steps she would have to take, just as she knew only death could ensure the reign of life once more. Swallowing back her emotions, her heart aching for all that which

would be sacrificed, she steeled her spine for what was to come. For, suddenly, the priestess was face to face with the same fiery, soulful eyes for which she had lost her vision to protect so many summers ago.



Hayisi seemed to him a dream in her gauzy linen dress billowing in the wind. Her long silvery hair in braids, the escaped strands swirling with the length of cloth around her body, enraptured him. Glassy eyes stared back with a sheen of wonder, a look that captivated with its incredible beauty.

In his mind, questions whirled. Strangers in this region were a rare sight unless they were merchants on the caravan trade route. So, who was she? Who was this woman watching him, fixated on him? With thoughts muddled by the impossible vision, he stood rooted a few steps before her. It was as if a water sprite from lore had taken human form. He had heard of goddesses appearing from the mists, springing forth from the streams, or simply watching mortals through wakeful visions. The southern nations had some rather exciting tales to tell about such creatures. Their own stories about Haya and Ar were quite tame in comparison.

"Who are you?" he thought, but no words formed on his lips.

She had a familiar look to her, yet he could not pinpoint where from. She seemed aglow with an ethereal light. There was a peculiar pallor to her skin, a sparkle emanating from within, beneath and beyond that which he could see. He decided she must be a sorceress, a shaman of the gods with the power to heal or destroy. Confidence in his assumptions grew when her movements proved nearly imperceptible. It was as though her legs need not travel to bring her forward. Perhaps it was he who had approached? She seemed to stand still once more, but now he was positive her essence beckoned him over.

Wary and unnerved, Arme slowly approached the apparition.

Few knew of his existence, and fewer still about his birth. Hayli was one of those select few, besides his parents and the couple that had raised him as their own near this current village. His parents he had not seen since the day he drew breath. He knew his father had never accepted the dark child as his own, vehemently accusing the virtuous queen of illicit relations. His mother had been confined to the high walls of the northernmost castle for the last twenty-eight summers while the unwanted son of the king had taken refuge along these southern borders, far from prying eyes and sharp tongues. He had just lately received word of his estranged father's untimely death, finally freeing the mother he never knew. Perhaps now she could enjoy that which life offered. He tried to forget the whispers stating she had long perished; her light extinguished by the solitary sadness. He refused to accept this, hoping instead that she lived if only to see her children once more. The thought sent a jolt of pain to his heart.

Looking at the woman, he was unsure what to think. Life had not been overly kind to him, though it was generally quite bearable. He had seen his share of the divine, if he were to be honest, the dreams he saw a clear testament to the existence of beings far more significant than the human mind could imagine. Sometimes it felt as if he was in direct commune with Ar himself. The sun at high noon, with its relentless rays of heat, was usually where he found his greatest solace from the darker thoughts threatening to consume him. Today, however, it felt as if the world had shifted and the stars realigned, with this woman before him at the center of this growing chaos.

Transfixed by that which he saw before him, all he could utter was, "who are you?"

She smiled with such sadness; it nearly broke his heart when she replied, "A celestial messenger, my Dark Prince. Of life or death, we have yet to decide."

A cool breeze caressed, coaxing the royal into understanding. How could he understand, though? What form of jest was this? Who had sent this woman? Eyes narrowed as her lips moved.

Parched lips, he noticed. Thin, chapped and in dire need of water.

"And what is it the gods seek of me, my lady?" Fiery eyes, so brown they were almost black, radiated the confusion he felt. There was an unyielding strength within him, and a will to protect what little joy he had found in his life. Yet, he trod gently with the beguiling ancient creature before him. It would not do to appear impolite before the gods.

With quiet sadness, the stranger replied, "To give you death and thus give you life immortal."

He startled, not comprehending the true meaning of those words. Hayisi watched without sight into eyes that held the night, a cold abyss warmed only by a burning soul. It felt as if she knew him; knew of his sorrows and his quiet home where love blossomed. Knew of the torments, the bond between god and mortal which manifested in an affinity even the man in question knew little about.

"I think I did not hear that right." The stunned prince choked out the words, lips set in a grim line.

"Forgive me, Your Highness, but I will help you understand."

"Understand what, exactly? Why honorifics?"

"I beg you to allow yourself to listen to my tale. Try to see the world as I see it through sightless eyes and frighteningly clear visions alone. Haya is my protector, and I am her humble servant." Closing her eyes, the wizened priestess allowed the cooling breeze and sweet scent of life to give her the strength to continue.

Eyes narrowed; a scowl graced the prince's full lips. The gods held little meaning for him, at least when it came to such loyalty and servitude.

"Go on..."

"Our tale begins long before you were born. The gods rarely allow for destruction to occur without providing a means to stand back up from the ashes and rebuild the world into one more

glorious than the last. Without a doubt, the gods knew the future, they knew of the coming devastation. They also understood how a single change in what is deemed the past could warp all that we know of the future. When you were born, the moon was an ominous red. It bled in a manner that frightened your parents, and when the morning light fell over your features, darkness began to brew in the king's heart. The queen held no fault in all of this; Hayane was merely the soul to bring into this world a beautiful being, one whom the gods themselves had sent. I was there when the prince was born. I was there when the queen gasped in despair, and the ashes marked you. I was there and felt every last nerve in my body resonate; resonate with the whispers of the heavens."

Taking a deep breath, she continued. "Yet I walked away when ordered to. I left the queen's side, never to be seen by the royals again; but not before stealing away the treasure the king had declared an abomination. As a lone priestess, the Gegha mountain range of Haya became my home. And that is where I lived, had my child and then my grandchild, until the day came when a dream presented itself and the goddess spoke. She spoke of an awakening, of disaster striking, and the black bull known as the savior, protecting a child of the gods. We, the priestesses of Haya, have seen this: Fire will rain from the horizon, a raging inferno which our prophecies state will annihilate all in its path. The mountains will bleed fire, and the sky will blaze. Death will be around us, everywhere, without end to the carnage. The gods know that if the inferno consumes all, they will perish, for a god's soul is shackled to its children. And so, a man was born in the Year of the Eagle, dark and with immense hidden strength, the guardian to our most precious jewel, our hope for salvation. He will not be human as we know humanity, a man more than what a man should be. It will be his destiny to ensure the survival of his people, a prince born to the chaos of a bloody moon; a prince who will never reign as king."

Stunned, the color draining from his face, the dark man from her story stared at the sorceress before him, mind battling against comprehension.

"And what does this have to do with me?" The growl and bite in

those words were unmistakable. "Am I to believe I will fight an inferno? That I will be this protector?"

A celestial smile by an ethereal woman. It was gentle and pure, making him wonder at his own madness. He did not need to listen, and yet he did not want to move away from this spot. The warmth was apparent in those blue eyes his current nemesis looked upon him with, a murkiness to the color adding to her mystery. "I must first take from you your mortality, to create a weapon more powerful than the deepest sorcery, more efficient than a hundred armies, and more loyal than a mother to her son. You will lose much of what you have and perhaps curse the gods until the end of time; however, it is crucial to the nation's survival that we create this unnatural being, a creature who will be feared for many a millennium to come."

With the beginnings of frantic emotions seeping in, a panic set into his heart that nearly sent him fleeing from this conversation with the gods. Trying to rid himself of his confusion, the royal instead tapped into fiery anger and rebelliousness, righteousness marred by the force of dark emotions.

"Do you even know my name?"

"Son of Ar, you have been named Arme."

Shaking his head, Arme tried to decipher the words spoken, words which sounded as foreign as barbarian languages to his ears. She must have understood his sudden shuttered look, the tension in his stance, for he felt soothing waves of her own aura gentle the fierceness of the look he favored her with. After all, she had just proclaimed she would kill him to create a weapon both loyal and insurmountable in strength. The former most definitely did not hold any appeal, and he was confident he did not yearn for the latter, either.

"Why?" Flashing brown-black met sightless blue.

"You are required to protect the queen and the child she will carry in her womb."

Now utterly perplexed, so much so that he swayed on his feet, Arme wondered if his older brother had married without sending invitations to the shameful side of his family. Few knew the late king had a second son, but Arameni had never shunned the one his father had considered a bastard. He had ensured his brother lived comfortably, never wanting for anything. They had seen one another only once after Arameni had found out about a long-lost brother and sent a letter formally proclaiming him as kin. Arme's request to remain hidden from the world was the only thing that had kept the new king from throwing feasts and celebrations in his honor. After multiple rejections, he had also stopped inviting Arme and his family to court. And so, in a gesture of goodwill, a monthly stipend was sent to the prince to ensure they lived well above their means if they so wished. It had suited Arme perfectly until today, when the thought of not even having received news of a loved blood's wedding seared his heart.

"No queen exists at the moment, let alone a child..." Giving voice to thoughts, he tried to hide a stutter. Brows drew together, each moment adding to the strangeness of the situation. He could tell her heart was heavy for him, but she persisted anyhow, fanning the flames of worry, as he had a feeling he would not be taking her next words well.

"Not long into the future, he will find a bride and a golden period shall begin. It will be a match made by the gods; love found within war. Much good will come to our nation during the months following this. However, forces from the south will ride against us, demanding both our blood and our lands. They will crush our armies and destroy all we have built up so painstakingly. You must protect the little one, for without her, there is no salvation for our nation. Blessed by Ar you are, dear boy. You will know suffering, yes, but this is the duty placed at your feet, the heavy burden on your shoulders. No other may fulfill this mission."

"I am to be the savior of a nation?" Arme spoke incredulously, unsure how to digest this information.

"No, merely the protector of the savior."

He stood there before the priestess, dumbfounded by this turn of events. Who was he but the unwanted child of a proud king, brother to the heir to the throne? Hayisi motioned for him to sit with her by the nearby brook and enjoy the serenity of the landscape. It was a welcome request.

"My lady, I have never even been to battle. I am not a conscript. I know how to use a weapon, of course, but you have mistaken me for another, surely."

Smiling serenely, she waited a moment to reply.

"When you are needed on the battlefield, you will know what to do. A *dakhanavar*'s abilities sharpen and focus one's inherent skills. If you know how to use a weapon now, you will become infinitely stronger and more able once you take full form. The gods would not leave their warrior defenseless, I assure you."

Shaking his head, he tried to imagine what such an experience would be like but failed. Arme did not want to be here. He needed to get away from the sorcery in words woven around him. He knew duty bade him stay. There was a ring of truth in the woman's story. Who was he to oppose a priestess? Who was he to think he had a choice when the gods commanded he lay down his life for them?

Arme's musings were to be expected, and he was glad Hayisi was wise enough not to comment. He noticed her raise her chin to the sky and wondered what she felt at that moment. Older she may be, but ugly she was not. Such details did not go unnoticed. Her soul emanated a bright light which gave her skin a healthy glow, a reason for many a man's homage and adulation. He certainly felt a strange allure and admiration when he gazed upon her. The long hair glinting in the summer sun had him entranced. Perhaps the loveliest bit about her was the strange confidence with which she walked this earth. She was an anomaly, a mystery, and most certainly someone to be reckoned with. He stared in awe while his mind struggled to digest all that she had told him.

"Can you describe the landscape for me, my son?"

Cocking his head to the side, he indulged this elder beauty who

seemed to see without actual sight. Strange enough, those bright blue eyes of hers were not dead, as a blind woman's frequently were, but somehow warm and full of passion.

"Certainly. You are sitting right near the riverbank. Your dress will probably be muddied up, and your bare feet are already drilling holes into the soft ground. The grass here is almost feathery. And the flowers! Well, these plains are my wife's pride and joy. If I wish to make her smile, a bouquet from here will make her heart soar. Before you is a stream, and not too far down, perhaps all of fifty steps, is a sizable waterfall, coursing through the mountains jutting out ahead of you and protecting our kingdom. Beyond, Ar's light shines as far as the eye can see and Haya's grace blossoms everywhere." His wistful glance around lapsed him into meditation, drawing strength from the perfection surrounding him.

"It is beautiful here," she said when the silence grew heavy.

"Yes, yes, it is. It's my home," he agreed with a small smile.

"I do not know how long you may remain here, however." Her sadness reflected in her voice; time stood still.

"Excuse me?"

Anger seemed to brew in his chest again, eyes heating with the intensity of emotions.

Laughing under her breath, she made her amusement known. "You may tell a man that he has a sacred duty which requires his death and rebirth, and he takes it in silence, but point out his home and serene lifestyle are threatened by this sacrifice, and emotions surge through. Such a quality might come in handy when the time comes," smiled Hayisi. "Very handy indeed."

"Forgive me, Priestess, but I believe I am entitled to make that choice."

Her quiet confidence was detestable, even if it were true. His pride would not allow Arme to admit he was considering the route suggested. Pushing to his feet, he bowed with disdainful respect before pivoting to stride away from the woman who held his

destiny in her dainty, time-withered hands.

He turned his back on her and everything she represented. The slight was not lost on the priestess, but she refused to speak as she felt the emptiness he left behind.

"Yes, you are, my young black bull," she whispered in the wind, knowing without a shadow of a doubt the choice he would make.

Chapter Three

Dakhanavar



Clad in nothing but the thickness of her cascading tresses and red clay paint depicting the patterns of life and death, the woman before him muttered quietly while she looked upon Arme in sightless intent, the noble son of a once great king, a prince long forgotten by the world.

Strange magic had drawn him to where she awaited, knowing his destination the moment he made his resolution. Pulled forward as though his steps were choreographed, the path paved for him invisible to any other, he noticed the red cast of the moon; how it hung in the sky like an orb so large, you could get lost in its incredible beauty. He had stumbled at the opening to the cave, mesmerized by the reflection of the light off the black obsidian immortalized in unrelenting stone. Now, he gazed back, unflinching and steady, stripped naked and bathed in the moonlight shining in from the circular holes carved into the ceiling and walls around him. The effect of the red light falling on obsidian jutting from gray stone was mesmerizing, enough to throw a fully alert man into a gentle trance.

"You came just in time," she nodded in greeting when he arrived a few moments back. He could have ignored the siren's call, he

thought for the umpteenth time that night, but this was a matter of pride for the man and duty for the prince. He would not waver from his task, no matter how daunting the future seemed.

Though the many summers he lived through were full of hurt and longing, the late king's blood coursed through Arme's veins and there was a hidden reservoir of strength in him that corresponded well with the rough wilderness of the country's terrain. It was an honor, a great pleasure, to be a royal of Harrania, despite the sordid details surrounding his birth. Guests of the realm were often left in awe at the sheer beauty of his world, but they could not see beneath the façade. They could not know how foreboding the mountains were, how dangerous the fields. There was a mysterious force that drew many a man in, with varying intent. Trying to gather his bearings, Arme reflected upon all that he was and all that he could be. He might never be king, but he had always hoped to see the land's prosperity for all the summers to come. In truth, the people had known great happiness under Aramast's rule and had reaped the many rewards of trade. Neighboring lands paid them tribute, clans assimilated into their fold, and the Harrani had tasted both the pains of war and the weariness of peace.

With all that in the past now, this woman spoke of darkness; an end to the era of good, of prosperity, and of overall security. This resonated with him all too well. His father's murder by an unknown hand had brought a strange sort of peace, he thought with clenched teeth, a muscle ticking at his neck. Those around him had never fully accepted him, his father's shadow haunting his every step, despite the low profile kept throughout his life. Of course, he had not wished the old man the fate that befell him, a murder in the woods. At the hands of a foreigner, perhaps, as was the consensus; a dear friend of his, others whispered. Whoever raised the dagger and struck between the shoulder blades, a clean swing that pushed the sharp edge well into the king's heart, the deed was done; Arme was forgotten, and his brother, Arameni, shone like the sun itself despite his many flaws.

Where Arme was built hardy, with bulging muscles and the

strength to pull a small tree from its roots with sheer might, his brother was thinner, leaner, and gentler, requiring a large amount of training to keep up his strength and agility. Where Arme was a dark golden color and almost beast-like with black fur coating his body, Arameni was light and smooth as a babe; even the fine thread marking his abdomen disappeared under the sun. The sprinkling on his forearms and legs could easily be dismissed, as well. Light to darkness, day to night, sun to moon. Indeed, the brothers could not have been more different. Whereas Arameni ruled from the much-coveted throne of obsidian lined with a hefty amount of gold and lapis lazuli, Arme was perfectly happy with his simple family, his home in a cave, spending his days tending to his animals, his fields, and helping those in need. But royal blood flowed through their veins, and there was no turning back from the destiny laid out before him. This was their land. These were their people. He would do everything in his power to protect his birthright.

Destiny was a strange thing, with this new prophecy unfolding soon enough, and a somewhat dispassionate Arme in the center of the plans the gods wove for his people. The country would face an uncanny enemy mere seasons into the future, according to this bewitching priestess before him, and it would be up to him to ensure the daughter of Haya, born of fire and shrouded in icy mist, could overcome this enemy and free her people from the ruthless rule of barbarians. As the woman who brought him this burden moved closer, Arme watched with a set jaw and cool expression in fathomless eyes that darkened to an abyss ready to suck in the world around them. He had often laughed at the sharp contrast his features held, compared to the majority of those living in these lands. Neighbors like the Mitta were recognizable through their darker tints and often wondered if his mother had indeed been unfaithful. He had even contemplated moving down to their lands, hoping to blend into the local populace instead of calling attention to himself. Pride and honor ruled his heart, however, which made abandoning his people impossible.



For Hayisi, such thoughts were far from mind. She knew of the queen's fidelity, and she would never question the kind woman's integrity or her love toward a husband who had proven to be wholly unworthy of all that she had had to offer. It would be hard on the young man once he returned to the world of mortals, thrown into the snake's pit one calls politics. He was necessary, however, and the gods had allowed his birth for this reason alone. She was positive. And so, she moved closer, felt his apprehension, she willed him to understand he was no longer alone.

"Arme, Son of Aramast, you have been summoned to hear of your fate. It is one to fear, one to loathe, but also one all those you meet will envy you for. Will you agree to bear the hardships placed upon you on this day?"



Looking quite perturbed, the young man rocked on his heels, fighting the urge to flee. It was sorcery that had called him here, and sorcery that kept him bound. He had heard of such powers existing, of beings that even the gods showed their respect to, flesh and blood with the ability to create and destroy, to love and despise with a single breath, to bring forth life and snuff it all out with the whims of death. Standing before this creature now, he quaked. He had come because he wanted to, because he understood he finally had a place in this world. Falling to his knees before the magnificence of the all-seeing blind priestess, Arme accepted the knowledge he would be given as undeniable truth. The problem was trying to keep himself from retching at the thought of what he would become because of her machinations. He would be lying if he did not admit to being a touch curious about the process, though.

"Listen to me closely, my sweet young prince. You have a wife

and son who you will see through life and death. You will also see the lives and deaths of many others for generations to come. The world will soon be engulfed in fear, the earth will be soaked in blood, and the birds of fire will not raise their heads until the celestial daughter is born. Haya and Ar will reign supreme over these lands, but will be ridiculed by those who wish to destroy their children. The Arkan Mountains and the Plains of Garna will be under your protection. From this day, you will forsake your mortality and become one with the gods, a physical being on this earth to serve the Great Mother and Father until they deem your duty has reached its end. Your wife's womb will remain empty, and your family will not understand the monster they will see in you. Your son may understand you someday, but perhaps too late." She paused for a breath.

"You will bear the burden of protecting as many as possible when the bloodthirsty bands arrive. You will provide a haven for the innocent who seek shelter. However, the most important task you shall undertake is protecting the next queen from harm. She will give birth to the goddess in human form. The young child will be the true daughter of Haya, her rule signifying the end of strife and the beginning of a great era. When the time is right, you shall know of the deepest secrets that await your people. The child will be your priority, no matter the circumstances. Should you fail in your duty, Hayara will fall. Arameni's marriage will signify the creation of Hayara. His daughter's death before achieving all that she must will be the nation's end. Do you accept the sacred duty our Almighty Ar and our Benevolent Haya have bestowed upon you? Do you swear your life to fulfilling this duty entrusted to you by the gods?"

The booming voice held him entranced. The fate she had written for him was sealed. He had no will to fight, to demand a mortal life. And what would human life give him, anyhow? What would it mean to spend the rest of his life in exile, as a prince of darkness and nothing more? No, he had his destiny to fulfill, and though he may never be king, a king with a throne, at least, he would rule in his own right and ward off the danger that threatened the light. This

goddess had given him a way out of the dreariness his life promised. But nagging in the back of his mind was the thought of his loving wife turning her back on him, of his son looking at him not as a hero, but a monster. He had planned for a large family, with happy children and years of traditions they would see together. A tear slipped unbidden, rolled down his cheek, and disappeared into the stubble lately covering his unshaven face. Would Hayli look at him again in the same manner? Would she use her obsidian blade to clean off his beard, giving the loving gaze she had always reserved just for him? Would she want to touch him and be touched in return? He had come here without her knowledge, without sharing this with her. He had hinted at wanting to bolster a relationship with his brother, venture to the capital, and she had grudgingly listened before changing the subject. What would Aran say once he found out the truth? Could he expect such a sweet and sensitive child to welcome his father with the same abandon he had in summers past?

"I understand your fears and understand the battle waging within you," a kind but stern countenance appeared before him rather suddenly; he had not expected her to come so close.

"My family..." he croaked.

"It depends on what you deem family, Your Highness," Hayisi smiled.

"My wife, my son..." Tears gathered in his eyes, throat tightened with emotion.

"Your brother, his wife, your niece," she countered.

"My people..."

"Yes, the entire nation."

His eyes widened at this point. The scope of it overwhelmed. It was a good thing he had chosen to sit on a boulder instead of a chair, for the weight of it all would have crumbled its wooden frame. Closing his eyes and putting aside both his person and immediate family, he cleared his mind. He would not fail that

which his birth dictated he protect. He had the wives and children of his people to consider, as well. Pushing himself to a standing position once more, he took a deep breath and met her intense gaze with his own.

"I accept, prophetess of Haya, and I readily swear my life to the gods. However, my fear and my trepidation in forsaking a man's role in fathering children still burn within me. I have no wish to become a monster, yet I am forever the loyal servant of my merciful gods. I will serve for all of eternity if that is what they wish as the weapon that topples the enemy, the heart that cares lovingly, the mind that decides logically, and the flesh that protects my people. Never shall I raise a hand to strike a woman, never shall I threaten a child, never shall I refuse to help the elderly up and never shall I rob the innocent of his crop. The power I gain will be used for the betterment of those around me and never for my own selfish desires. I swear my allegiance to all that is good in this world as I bow before you today, Priestess Hayisi. I shall protect the king's choice of queen, and I shall die before any harm comes to the child of Haya waiting to be born unto this world. I so swear and accept."

Nodding, she bent to kiss him, using her fingers to trace his visage and find his lips.

"Beautiful," she murmured.

Despite the brevity of the moment, he allowed for a small smile.

"My wife has been the only one to say so to date, my lady."

"What a waste," she chuckled lightly before sobering up and cupping his face with gentle hands. The sadness was evidence that even a messenger of a goddess was not immune to the gravity of such a sacrifice by a human. Her duty allowed for no such compassion, however, and he understood this.

Moving away, she felt her way with confidence toward the back of the cave where she had left the most crucial piece of the day's puzzle.

"What is it?"

"A sacred elixir imbued with powers even I have yet to comprehend. Hayimi, my granddaughter, was an immense help in its production. Sometimes, I wonder if my progeny does not already surpass me in divine abilities," she absently murmured.

Watching the radiant woman return with the seal to his fate, Arme gulped. With the oath given, all that remained was to ingest the dark liquid placed before him, to let the true sorcery take hold of his body and create out of the young prince a nearly invincible weapon. Staring into the goblet, he took a healthy swig of the strangely sweet brew, accepting all that it entailed before his heart turned incomprehensibly silent for a few moments. He was not even sure it started back up again.

The *dakhanavar* was thus born; brother to the king, an immortal who would thrive off the blood of the enemies he slew. A fire seemed to engulf him as he screamed in agony, his last thoughts before the darkness overtook him that of his adoring wife, a picture flickering before it faded with the flames as his fangs punctured the neck of the sorceress.

Chapter Four

Goddess



He held her in his arms. The angel had closed her eyes and collapsed the moment his screams had erupted. A strange satisfaction bathed him before reality sank in. This woman had taken it all from him. It mattered not that he had given himself up willingly at the end. She had forced his hand. The pain in his head would not leave, pushing him in and out of consciousness. He had collapsed the moment the fire snaked through his veins, but at this moment, struggling to hold on to his sanity, he held her crumpled body in his arms. With small spurts of strength, he had pushed himself over to where she lay and now, holding her close, wondered why he wanted to cry. She was so exquisite and yet so beautifully cold. Her skin felt like ice.

It suddenly dawned on him, much to his horror.

"She's dead."

Rocking on his heels, he let out a howl. She was dead. He was supposed to die, but he was alive. She had died instead. How? Why? The thoughts were whirling in his mind. There was no stop to their torment, no reprise from the confusion that threatened to drown him. Unable to concentrate, to understand his next moves,

he whispered sweet nothings to the empty shell with the glassy eyes. What had she done? What had she been, really?

"Wake up, Woman!"

The world had been ending around him, his heart palpitating beyond human ability, and then it stopped. It stopped, he realized brokenly. His heart stopped, but the woman before him was dead. It made no sense. Like a volcano ready to erupt, his thoughts burned into him, built up the rage, and filled him with an anguish no human should ever feel.

"Why? Tell me why!"

There was nothing there, though. No flicker of the eyes, no movement of the lashes. The priestess's chest was still, her body heavy, her color drained. Hair that once had a slight golden sheen had turned entirely silver, even gray. The braids had come nearly undone and spilled around her, tickling his suddenly attuned senses. How long had he been unconscious? A few moments? A few nights? How long since she had breathed her last breath?

"Three days," came the forlorn response to his mental questioning. "You had to see her, to feed on her, before I could bury her..."

The child stood before him, framed by flames that licked against walls from strangely unknown sources, a tiny version of the woman in his arms. Gold hair was plaited in two strands, a style typical to his people, and deep blue eyes stared at him almost angrily.

"Who are you?"

"The venom in your voice is out of place, Beast," she spat back at his growl.

"Child, do not test me. You are the spitting image of this priestess. Who are you?" This time, he reined in the rage that threatened to erupt. He could see the wonder behind the pain and could, strangely, sense her fear. It was a somewhat uncomfortable feeling, almost as if a hundred ants suddenly engulfed his body.

"Take care you do not burst with your emotions, Prince," she replied.

"For the last time, before I rip you to pieces, who are you?" This time, the fury in his voice was unmistakable. It was almost as if his emotions were now amplified. But the child did not seem to be shaken by it. Perhaps she understood what he had become? The look she gave him said it all. She knew of his hatred, his pain, and all that he would endure. Those eyes that seemed to see beyond him held a spark of recognition he could not understand. It was disconcerting how she stared so intently at his muscled arm.

"The mark remains, despite your change." Nodding to herself, she half-smiled, an eerie lift of the lips.

"You might have made a mistake?" Arme asked incredulously, nostrils flaring.

"Stop your growling, Beast. It hurts my ears. I am not as sweet and gentle as my grandmother, to make myself clear. Right now, I am also the only one who knows how you function. You can learn the easy way or the hard one. You decide."

Flashing eyes challenged his glare.

"One moment I am a beast, the next prince. What am I to you, exactly?"

"A *dakhanavar*. The Dark Prince." She smiled. He wondered why she stared into his eyes with such curiosity.

"Speak plainly, Child."

"I do. You are a creature of darkness. You were born for this purpose, and in your creation, you took away a life, a precious member of my family. She said she would try to remain alive, but I knew from the start what we needed to complete this ritual. Her blood was the key." Tears threatened to rise, to spill over, he realized, but within moments she had her composure back, and it seemed as if her hardened heart did not feel a thing. He had to wonder at the strength in such a little girl.

"Arme, you are a prince. You are never to be king yourself, but you will protect these lands as if you were."

"My brother will die?"

"Yes, though not before he lives."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning King Arameni will wed and plant his seed; he will be happy, his people will prosper because he is kind and honest, and he will always have the love of both family and stranger. When the inferno comes to swallow everything and everyone in its path, you will be the only one who can both repel the attack and survive. You are the only one who will walk through the fire, through the despair, and you will keep the child safe from harm, even at the cost of your own life. I do not yet know if that will be needed, however."

Despite the ominous words and the sudden pain that gripped his heart at the thought of losing a brother, the prince stood with his back straight, chin high, and stared coolly at the little priestess.

"Once again, I ask. Who are you? All I see is a child and yet you speak like an adult, mature beyond your age."

Smiling with dancing eyes, the child suddenly looked much younger than she had portrayed herself until now. "Do not be fooled by appearances. The souls of the dead priestesses continue with the birth of each new child. I am Hayimi, grandchild of Hayisi, new High Priestess to the Temple of Haya in the Arbos Mountains. From this day on, I am your friend, your mentor, your teacher. I do not expect you to trust me immediately, but I do expect you to be loyal, to listen, and to ask questions. I will guide you until the inferno consumes me, as well."

"The inferno consumes you? Do I not also protect you?"

"No, my visions are vague, but I do not think I will live through the war. I will join my grandmother where she stands by and serves the goddess." The look in her eyes was enough to stop a man's heart all over again.

"You know when you will die..."

"As my grandmother felt her own impending demise," she said.

Arme stared and stared, but no matter how hard he tried, he could not puzzle her words. Did all priestesses know every detail of their lives? How morbid to see the time and day of your death. How utterly unfair. You live only to die. Why does one live at all if that is the case?

"We live to make the lives of our people gentler or more fulfilling," she smiled.

"You can read minds." It was a statement.

"Yes, whether I'd like to or not."

Suddenly feeling dizzy, Arme leaned against the cave's smooth edges and pulled Hayisi's corpse closer to him.

"She's truly dead?"

"Yes."

He simply stared, uncomprehending.

"Why are you so calm?"

Raising her eyes to his, she finally allowed him to see her weakness. The tears she had kept at bay spilled over her cheeks, and suddenly she was sobbing. Arme's instincts brought him to the child's side, and he held her close. She was but a few summers older than Aran, perhaps. His compassion was as strong as that of a regular human. In that cave, after all that he had endured, it was almost as if her pain was his own. Suddenly, a scent hit him with such strength, he found himself staggering in near madness. Without thinking, he pushed Hayimi away, stumbling backward himself as he let out a howl.

What is this pain? What is this scent?

Why is my heart thumping as if it is a matter of life and death?

Is it actually beating or is it my imagination? What is happening?

Am I losing my mind? What am I becoming?

On and on and on, the questions swirled as he screamed in pain. Closer, closer, the buzzing was closer; the drum was nearer.

Is it a heart? Is that blood? Whose blood is this?

What have I become?

Suddenly, he came to and realized he had bitten into the child, was drinking her dry. She had closed her eyes but calmly breathed as she allowed him to sate his thirst, to finally understand what he was. Arme was a monster in the eyes of mortals, a fallen god one must tread carefully around, even offer blood tribute. There were ancient stories of such creatures, he thought with a start, though thinking was near impossible in that moment. Hayimi was his tribute. He did not notice her eyes trained on the quiet figure of her grandmother.

"What am I doing? I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" His heart raced. "How? Why?"

In alarm, Arme realized where he was and what he was doing. Suddenly, it was too late. The process which the older priestess had begun had been completed by her successor.

Smiling, she replied. "Do not worry about me. I will heal easily enough. Welcome to your new life, Prince."

Horried at her attitude, stupefied by her calm, Arme turned to flee this manic cave.

"Please don't go," she called out softly, and suddenly every inch of him was bound to her word.

He could not move, he found. His mind screamed for him to run, but duty bade him stay. The whispers of responsibility, of his choices which brought him here, kept him rooted. He looked toward the exit, to the light outside, and his urge to flee was great. Just one step, he thought. One step would lead to another, and he could run home, into the arms of his loving, gentle wife. He could put the gods and their magic behind him. Think of the prophecies

as only a dream. His body felt heavy, almost lethargic. His mind whispered for him to turn around, to face his fears. The whisper was seductive, coaxing him, and his heart knew he had to obey. This was his choice.

"Please, come back to me," she called almost lovingly. And so Arme, turning on his heel, returned to his young mistress as if a domesticated animal. His mind felt rebellious against a force he did not understand, but there was something that piqued his curiosity, despite his reflexive need to run.

"Please set me free," he begged, though it had been intended as a growled demand. Instead, he sounded small, a mewling cat where he wished to be the lion. His guilt overwhelmed him. With a trembling body and fearful mind, the Dark Prince finally looked straight into the blue orbs of the little priestess, only to find them glazed over.

"You have done well, my son. You might fear that which you are now, but never forget that I love you, that Ar favors you, and that you, only you, can protect the most precious gift our world has been given. Protect her as if she were your own. Love her as you would a daughter of your flesh and blood. Stand by her when times are toughest and advise her when she builds this world up once again." A tender smile appeared on the child's face, one of a woman wise beyond her years. On his knees now, he felt the touch against his temple, the gentle caress on his cheek. There was a glow to the child's body, and for a moment he thought he saw his mother before it morphed into the image of something more, something more significant than all he knew of humanity. He saw the essence of light and love. How does one see love?

"Haya..." the child breathed before collapsing against him.

"Haya..." He heard a voice from behind.

Part II

Chapter Five

Hayadusta



They stood with their chests puffed, jutting up toward the sky. Fierce in their stance, the mountains of Arania guarded against the cruel intentions of those who dared venture close. They were snow-capped, beautiful; a pristine landscape with its peaks scraping against the sky and reflecting perfectly over seemingly enchanted waters untouched by humanity. Today, they offered quiet solace to their mistress, a gentle being with a pure heart, the lovely daughter of a mighty king.

"My lady, we were quite worried. Your father requests your

presence." The sweet voice of a golden-haired boy pierced the silence. He looked to have barely seen sixteen summers.

She smiled indulgently, patting the stone seat beside her. The boy joined his mistress, absorbing the tranquility of the moment in a place devoid of responsibility and the hectic movement of everyday life.

"We are but a speck of dust in the wind, my young Aris, forever bowing to the might of these mountains. They can crush our very existence at any moment. Yet, just as a father for his child, they inspire awe and immense pride within me. Time and space cease to exist while I allow the mist to engulf my body and soul in its cool embrace, my vision never straying from the magnanimous sight before me. Humanity is but a fragile misconception of nature itself, powerless against the wrath of this earth and the gods above. Ar have mercy on the poor, misguided souls who believe they are somehow bigger than all that which we now see around us. Even the mist, this translucent damp substance, holds more power than the largest of human beings. She twirls her skirts and shrouds the truth in a mysterious haze, successfully concealing all that is real from the naked eye."

Aris stared, mesmerized by his princess. "My lady, should I not have already been exposed to your poetic words and strangely philosophic way of thinking, I would have been left unable to speak after such a lovely little speech."

"It is a good thing you understand me then," she replied with laughing eyes, a breathy giggle spilling from lips that had curved upward rather enchantingly. The boy's expression amused her.

"I understand you completely, Princess. The day is pregnant with veiled beauty. Look beyond the mountains, for example. Those fields, the soil rich and satiated from the abundant rainfall, a blessing from Haya, and the trees that line the borders of the meadows never cease to captivate. Every vein on every leaf is sacred. The wild pomegranates are the true treasures for me, symbolizing life in a way foreigners rarely could envision. Every seed is a child, a man, a mother. Each can grow into a new tree to

provide even more fruit with even more seeds. And the color! Princess, the color of a pomegranate is impossible to forget. I often lose myself in the sheer magnificence of Haya's grace, wandering through nature, a soothing balm to a battered heart. The wild thyme and mint hold such allure that drinking their tea, day in and day out, is not enough to sate my thirst." He spoke fervently, eyes strained on the magnificence before him. Hayadusta watched as the boy seemed to fall into a trance, a miniature version of herself.

"Yes, if nothing more, the colors of nature brighten and add simple pleasure to an often-cruel life." She smiled lovingly, enjoying the company of her young friend immensely.

He was her favorite, a servant with a heart of gold and wit so sharp she often wondered what his life might have been like should he have been born her brother instead of the child of a simple peasant. The princess was drawn to the boy from the day he appeared at her court and many an hour was spent speaking thus, debating the intangible, that which was beyond the scope of the human mind. Why life and why death, why the hatred and why do we love? These were daily discussions between the two friends, despite their difference in ranking in the world. She might be a few summers his senior, but she often felt there was no gap in intellect. He was her match in every way. Sometimes, she truly wished there were a blood relation. Sighing, she thought again about how he was the night to her day. They simply could not be more different, despite their glaring similarities.

Hayadusta, the cherished daughter of King Artash, was the jewel of the nation. For some, she was seen as too old to marry, for her headstrong will and quiet strength had dissuaded many a suitor. Her sweet smile and luminous eyes of blue, green, and gray nevertheless attracted a great many men. Yet none shared her passions, and none possessed the inherent strength and ambition to build, to mold something new, to create bread from stone. None had her tenacity, and all seemed to be interested in one thing only. Perhaps two. Sometimes the line blurred, as their passion for her stemmed from her place in this world and little else. She knew she was meant for greatness, but could not see such a fate attached to

any who approached her; and so, the princess looked on, ever searching for one she could honestly share her heart and soul with.

Instead of allowing her thoughts to consider romance, as circumstances would have it, the princess amused herself in the company of servants and squires, young folk eager to impart knowledge and debate the abstract, with whom she could share her private little world. Haya was her goddess, the Mother who had birthed the world and kept her people safe within her bosom. The moon was her favorite face, the bright and tranquil orb shrouded in mist and surrounded by her many twinkling children in the skies. Haya was mistress to the sun, to the mighty Ar who chased her throughout the Heavens, demanding she appear by his side. From time to time, she did, and those days bode good omen for marriages. Haya and Ar stood side by side in the sky, bearing witness to the lovelorn souls. Should she ever marry, it would be on such a day, without a doubt.

Gathering her skirts about her, Hayadusta cast one last wistful smile at the beauty of the region and, raising her chin, began the journey back to the stone castle where reality awaited. Aris scrambled after his mistress, the boy seemingly proud to be by her side, even as he trailed behind her, keeping a respectable distance.

"Is there anything of note I should be aware of before seeing to my father's wishes, dear Aris?"

"Not that I have been told, my lady. The court seems abuzz with news of war, however, one rumored to be an easy win against the Harrani people. Some say they are cursed, the king impotent, and the populace ruled by barbarians. Your father wants them dead, and the Harrani lands for himself. I am afraid that should such a thing occur, we would be faced with a decision: do the safest thing and put them all to the sword; take control of the land and enslave the people after executing the leaders; or simply enslave all and disperse them through our lands. I loathe all options, particularly if women get raped and children sodomized. I despise war, my lady, and cannot help but feel Ar's wrath with each new region we conquer. Ours may be an empire, but one which can crumble with

ease. I'm afraid, my lady, of what it all would mean if we crossed a line and reached a point of no return. It frightens me to no end, my lady!" His last words a whisper, Hayadusta knew he understood how such things could be construed as treason if they had not been spoken to the princess herself, a sensible woman who abhorred war.

She was a queen-in-training, and it was wholly apparent in every graceful step, careful phrase, and diplomatic answer provided. She knew better than to berate her young friend, particularly since she shared the same sentiments. Perhaps one day they would lose. Perhaps one day the gods would no longer smile upon the Arani. To date, they had never conquered lands of people who shared in their religion, which meant she had never felt such trepidation in her father's plans of expansion. Now, however, even the guileless princess, the gentle warrior in the flowing silk dress acquired from a merchant from Xin, knew this signaled a fall from favor. How would the gods respond when they attacked brothers and sisters, a people who worshiped Ar and Haya as fervently as the Arani? Would Ar roar in anger? Would Haya smother the living with her hail, frighten even the bravest hearts with her thunder? Something would inevitably occur, and she did not want her father's mistake to cost them their people's lives.

"Aris, lead me to my father, my dearest friend."



"Hayadusta!"

"Father," the princess bowed back in respect upon hearing her father's booming voice.

"Child, where have you been? Our guests simply could not eat without having you join us." She looked at the uninspiring group sitting before her, King Artash at the head of the table, the plates neatly arranged with the beautifully ornate black bowls imbued with gold inlays. The men did not interest her. She knew what he

was doing and had no intention of accepting any more suitors.

"Yes, dear princess, it would lift our spirits greatly to have your gentle presence with us," grinned one noble at the table, apparently already having taken a bite of his mutton, the act rather in line with his unapologetically impatient demeanor. The others nodded their agreement. No, thank you, she thought with disgust.

Unfortunately, her role dictated a certain decorum, meaning she could not curse the imbeciles at the table as she wished. She could, however, feign a ladylike illness. Narrowing her eyes for only a moment, suddenly she was all innocence.

"Thank you, Father, for informing me. Gentlemen, I regret I have caught a cold and must return to my chambers." Bowing deeply in mock respect, the lady gave her father a wry smile and walked out of the room. She would hear from him as soon as it was diplomatically possible for him to excuse himself, but she would allow him to seethe a little first, trying to entertain his guests. They had beady eyes. She did not like men who appraised her in such an insolent manner. They did not look kind; they did not appear particularly interested in who she was. Yes, she was being unfair. No, she did not care. Raising her brows, she wondered at the type of mischief she could cook up if any decided to linger after her rather clear message. At least one or two would remain at court, and that would be quite entertaining.

"That was cruel," Aris stated, falling into step with her. He had seen the scene unfold.

"You did not tell me this was the reason he wanted me," she threw back with a sneer.

"I didn't know, my lady," he lowered his eyes and slowed his pace.

It was cruel of her indeed, considering the boy had never lied to her in the summers she had known him. She inclined her head. "My apologies, Aris. I know you would not intentionally deceive me."

"Of course!"

"Your earnestness is enough for me, dear friend. I do not need any of these men. I have Father, I have you, and I can imagine myself ruling Arania alone." The thought appealed very much. Who needed a husband, anyhow?

Laughing at her proud look, Aris could undoubtedly imagine the Arani kingdom prospering with such a woman at its helm.

"You would be the greatest queen this world has ever known!"

"You, my sweet Aris, are perfect for my ego," she grinned before whirling girlishly. "The world will be mine!"

"All will bow to the Arani. You shall conquer the deserts to the south, the dense, snow-covered forest to the north. Word of your conquests will reach the ears of all, living in any of the four corners of the world." He loved her. His words touched her in a manner she would never admit to, not to him. She was his goddess, his entire world. It was almost painful to see the strength of the emotions in his eyes. She welcomed and reveled in it, however, for it was exactly what she needed in her life.

"Let us part before we end up causing more mischief, Aris," she winked, impishly sashaying toward her chamber. She should ready herself to meet her father, and suddenly she was in the mood to drive her court mad.

Circumventing the servants, dodging questions along the way, Hayadusta headed to her room. She knew her father would come to find her soon enough.

She did not have long to wait.

"Daughter!"

Feigning a headache, she turned her head slowly from where she lounged on her bed. "Yes, my darling father."

"You cannot run away thus, every time suitors arrive."

"Oh, yes, I can. It is your job to entertain them and mine to create a veil of mystery. Who is this beauty none can find? What is this illusion we long for?" Tittering at her thoughts, she sighed before

standing.

He frowned.

"They do not suit me, Father. Best you find a princess for our Artasa, instead."

Raising a brow, he remained quiet.

"You know they do not." Hands on hips, she was teetering between amused and annoyed now.

"You do not give them a chance. King Atti will be arriving soon. At least spend time with him. He is king of a powerful nation, for Ar's sake!" He worried for her. Oh, how he suffered. Hayadusta knew his mind all too well. He thought she was precious but too headstrong, that women should listen to their fathers and their husbands. They should be kind and gentle; princesses should think of their countries first. She frustrated him, reminding him of the Mother Goddess herself. She had heard him comparing her to their deity on multiple occasions. Haya might be proud of her daughter, but for King Artash, the child was a handful. At this rate, none would ever marry her. She was undaunted by that fact, but knew he was not.

"Father, I do not care if a man is king or pauper. I do not care for titles or riches or political matches. Perhaps that is something out of the romances the bards often sing about. Many princesses rebel these days, and they will continue to do so. But this is not a rebellion on my part, at least not for the sake of rebellion alone. I am simply not interested in forcing myself to live with a man I cannot love, for the sake of my country. You would be signing my death warrant should you force me. The one I marry must be a soul match. Now, tell me of these rumors concerning the Harrani."

"Soul matches do not exist," the king scoffed. "And politics are of no concern to you. Your role in this is to secure our place in the world, secure your throne."

"You know they do..."

"If they do, it is too painful to desire," he replied.

"That is because mother died in childbirth, and you have cursed the gods ever since. You keep trying to find new gods who are more merciful. But mother was a soul match for you. You have said so yourself." She stated the last gently, knowing it was a sore point for him, only admitted once in drunken depression. Since then, he had not touched a barley drink.

"You know nothing of what I felt."

"Father, even after all these summers and winters, you cannot remember her without your eyes filling with tears. You miss her every day of your life. I have seen you talking to the heavens, asking her to come to visit you in your dreams, to haunt your days, give your nights meaning."

Angry now, "Daughter! That is beyond nonsense. Do not dare state such things again!"

"Stop hiding behind a façade!"

"Know your place, Princess. You will marry a man of my choosing, and you will love him!"

"Never." The simple statement held much venom in it. He should have known she would fight him. She knew, however, that he would not back down from a threat. They were at an impasse. "And my place in politics will be defined over the years. I will rule, but no man shall be by my side unless I will it so."

It was so quiet; the voices of their guests could be heard from the courtyard far below.

"We shall see about that."

Chapter Six

Arameni



It would be prudent to mention at this point that the immediate region was divided into two factions, the Arani and the Harrani. Arameni, the much-loved son of Aramast, ruled the Harrani, while Hayadusta was princess to the Arani. Both cultures shared the same pantheon and followed the tradition of naming male children after the God Ar and the females after the Goddess Haya. Following their conquest of the lands of Abka and Oss, the Arani moved further south, crossing the Kura River into Harrania. This, as expected, was not well received by King Arameni.

"Sire, their plans seem to include conquering the entire region, perhaps also extending down to the southern nations."

"Yes, their penchant for taming apparently extends to humans."

"You refer to their taming of the wild horses? They ride with ease, without a doubt; their charioteers have been trained to reduce the enemy to ash. I fear we have met our match."

Arameni's adviser, Arodi, often came to the rescue, but his current nervous attitude alarmed the king. He was such a stern and iron-willed man, yet beads of sweat could be seen dotting his neck now. The gentle breeze blew goosebumps on exposed skin. None

had yet seen such a response from the feared commander. Arameni narrowed his eyes, understanding there was reason for concern.

"If this is the case, then we shall fight fire with fire. We have not yet met a foe we cannot defeat. Our numbers are great and our steeds mighty. You cannot believe we could lose this battle."

The king's ire was raised, frightening those in the vicinity more than a possible enemy invasion. From across the plain, soldier and servant alike turned away from the scene. There was a dark aura around their monarch and the fear swept through them without mercy.

General Arodi pulled the king aside, trying to explain the predicament. "My lord, I mean no offense, but we must tread carefully; our decisions could affect Ar's protection of our people." The feverish look in those eyes did not help with the king's alarm, blackening his mood further.

"I understand, Arodi. However, it would do you good to have trust in your king. I have an idea of how to defeat them, but merely lack sufficient intelligence at the moment," Arameni replied patiently, refusing to betray his beating heart, the flood of thoughts suddenly choking him. He refused to show his own trepidation at the idea of war with a people so similar to their own.

"If you have a plan, tell me what it is, so that I may at least help in its formulation."

"Perhaps you can..."

"Of course, Your Majesty!" The back and forth of emotions displayed was almost too much for the king to bear.

"Arodi, calm yourself first. Your fear is contagious, and if you do not school your features, even the enemy will understand just how great of an advantage they hold. For the love of Ar, act like the icy general you have always been!"

"Forgive me, Your Majesty."

Nodding, Arameni decided to divert attention and divulged

some of his thoughts. "Artash has a son. The best way to fell an invasion is to remove its head and give us negotiating power. He will not enter our lands without losing something precious, and I will not return his gem without substantial compensation."

The old man stared at his monarch in surprise, knowing his words held merit. The Arani guarded their leaders with their lives, however, and getting through would be a dangerous challenge to undertake. Of course, that did not mean it was entirely impossible.

"A foolhardy decision, Sire."

Snorting, Arameni looked at the man beside him as the hulking giant regained his composure. A good foot taller than the king and twice his width, stretching out his armor, with a hooked nose and chiseled jawline that gave him an ominous look, Arodi was a man to be feared; the scar only amplified this, running down from his temple and over his left cheek, before disappearing well below his collarbone. Arodi had never told the king the story behind the scar and Arameni refused to pry. No one enjoyed recalling a near-death experience, and from the looks of the disfiguring line, it had certainly not been a simple scratch. These mysteries were what made Arodi such a formidable foe on and off the battlefield. It was a good thing the man's loyalties lay with the crown, Arameni mused.

"The greater the risk, the greater the reward. We did not start this war, but I intend to be the one to end it. The Arani have become quite bothersome of late. While I do not presume to know the thoughts of the gods, I cannot imagine Ar is thrilled with the news of battle between his children."

"You may be correct in those assumptions, Your Majesty. However, you know we have reason to worry. Our numbers may be great, but the Arani are ruthless with their king at the helm."

Knowing the reason his adviser mentioned this point, Arameni grinned sadistically.

"We are merciful with the innocent; they are bloodthirsty royals after our throne." The tone of his voice was enough to harden

Arodi's heart against the festering fear manifesting in physical illness, the king hoped. For the night was young, and the battle would soon be on their doorstep. They had much to sort out before the sun broke over the horizon.



Sleep had eluded Arameni for days. He had mapped out the exact coordinates and timing of the invasion, but fretted over the details. This battle would determine his strength and the power he held over his people. The thought of failure could not cross his mind, let alone be allowed to fester into reality. The Arani would fail in their attempts to intimidate the Harrani, but he would have to be careful in his decisions. Ar would protect them. Yet, how could Ar choose between both his children? Such thoughts plagued the king's mind until the wee hours of dawn, his agitation and lack of sleep negatively affecting his ability to function. He knew dwelling on the details would do them no good, as war had a tendency to disrupt even the best-laid plans. Yet, with hypothetical scenes playing out in his mind, Arameni waited for sleep. He would not anger the gods by seeking the destruction of the Arani. No, he would have to circumvent them somehow, while still dominating the situation.

"Arodi!"

Striding in as quickly as he could, the equally frustrated general stared back at his king, his frozen expression and sudden tenseness giving away his shock at the sight that greeted him. Disheveled and unkempt, Arameni's beard had grown out and been left uncombed. "Your Majesty!"

"Stop staring at me like I have grown a second head. Call in the boy to clean me up, will you?"

"Yes, Sir!"

The king tried to appear strong before the men, but the dark

circles were clearly there. Arameni had noticed them time and again in the looking glass. Knowing Arodi would easily surmise the danger this state boded for the king's health, he put on a mask of arrogance he hoped would hide the evidence of his lack of both proper hydration and rest. It should be enough to assuage the commander's concern, he thought while wiping the exhaustion from his eyes.

"Just a moment," Arodi said before poking his head out of the door leading to the king's quarters within the northern fort. They had been camping out here for the past fortnight, and while it was a beautiful space, Arameni worried about its destruction. He would have to ensure the enemy did not get too close, meeting them in an open field instead.

Ushering in the young barber, the commander cautioned the boy against speaking up. Nodding, he brought in his tools to begin a royal makeover.

"Boy!"

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

"Make sure I look like the grand leader this land deserves," he sighed.

Arodi's frown only deepened as it became quite clear the king's sanity rested on their victory. The tables had been turned, and while Arodi strode in confidence now, Arameni had overtaxed his strength and mind.

"Victory will be ours, Your Majesty," Arodi spoke out earnestly, his positivity in direct contrast with the panic he'd been battling against for multiple days now. "You always win."

Eyes narrowed, Arameni continued to stare at the ceiling. The carvings were intricate as he followed the images of conquest and eternal life, beautifully illuminated under candlelight. The artistry flowed like an ocean, and while the sun shone brightly against these walls during the day, at night, when a full moon graced the skies, the stone used to build this part of his fort appeared to glitter with

dark light. Some called this pure obsidian the rock of the underworld, ruled by the elusive Spentaramet, a figure of lore. Devil's stone. For him, however, the fragments included in the stone construction only added to the beauty. It was such a delicate thing, forged in fire, breathtaking to behold. It mirrored the darkness of a mother's womb.

"Your Majesty?"

Sighing with a slight smile, the king kept his eyes trained on the eight-winged wheel of eternity.

"Yes, it appears so, my dear friend. But tell me, how does Ar choose between his children? I must act in such a manner as to not offend the powers which protect us. The Great Mother would strike us dead should we raise a hand with killing intent, no matter who they might be. We are no better than the Arani, and of course, we are no worse. So how does one defeat an enemy who shares his blood, born of the same womb?"

"You negotiate to your advantage."

"Correct! And how does one go about bringing one of the proudest nations in the world to the negotiating table?"

"You do plan to take the prince! A strategy has been drawn up, Your Majesty?" Arodi asked with hope in his eyes. The fear of days past had ebbed and finally abated. If they could win without shedding a drop of blood, metaphorically speaking, that would make them history's most noble empire. It would be a dream unfolded with better results than expected.

Smiling to himself, Arameni finally allowed his body and mind to calm. Arodi could sense it when they faced significant difficulties. The elder general's ease of manner gave the king some peace. His plan would work out well, it appeared.

He just needed a courtesan's skillful hands to massage the tension from his shoulders first.

Chapter Seven

Artasa



Dark golden hair curled down against Artasa's nape. His fingers burned from his latest foray at the blacksmith's, trying his hand at smelting copper, as he rubbed the soot from eyes clear and blue as the sky above him. His sister teased him about the flecks of green which dominated at times. She called him a rare breed, but it was her eyes that had been the basis of many a teasing session when they were younger. He could not remember their mother, but the king had mentioned once about her foreign origins with deep brown eyes. The bark of the trees reminded him of this often, and he wondered if she had blue or green or grey in there, as well. It mattered not, he thought now, polishing his blade. His mother was gone and there were more important things to consider now.

The Arani were famed for their copper weapons, just as the Harrani were for their use of obsidian in nearly everything they created. Even their throne was of polished obsidian, with claimants assuring all who would listen that there was nothing grander nor more beautiful than the seat of the Harrani crown. It was of a rare kind, they stated with certainty, brought from the black mountains where the lava lay sleeping until the day it would erupt once more. It was a combination of clear, black, and brown, with swirls and

waves woven by nature to inspire awe. But nothing came close to the beauty of copper, Artasa thought. It was his favorite metal to work with. There was news of iron ore as well, yet the Arani had not managed to acquire any to date.

Walking into his current accommodation, Artasa smiled at the old couple who had the table ready. These days, it simply made sense to make friends with their people, help them dig a home and later utilize it as a place of rest while they fought battle after battle, raking in victory after victory. Looking at the kindly couple, sadness washed over the prince. Her eyes crinkled in happiness, his with pride. The bread on the table was freshly baked, the cheese had come from their neighbors across the valley with whom they traded their butter. Wine was available in abundance in these regions. Grabbing a quince off the table, he leaned in to give his host mother a kiss on her weathered cheek. Yes, he loved his people. With every new tribe added to their budding empire, their power grew. The Arani might was well known locally, and perhaps quite far from here as well, he thought. It was these people, these hospitable but proud individuals, however, who held his heart at the end of the day.

"These are delicious. Your garden does not have quince, though. Where are they from?"

"I found some in the wild, my prince!" The older man exclaimed triumphantly, his decaying teeth beautifully presented to the world.

"Ah! How superb! I will be sure to have some pears delivered as well, then. I'm sure our mother here would enjoy them greatly."

Eyes shining with mirth, she patted his hands. "Highness, simply having you here is enough to make these last summers of ours very happy."

"You are still young!"

"Ah, my sweet prince, we have buried grandchildren already. The last bout of sickness took our little Hayna." Droplets formed and began to fall lightly at the memory of the little girl with fire in

her eyes, ruddy-cheeked and golden, a peri of lore in the sunlight. Artasa had met the child once, quite unexpectedly in passing, a clouded memory now. The elder had faced many such trials during her lifetime, and the passing summers did not seem to heal so well when one wound followed the other.

A battered heart stood before Artasa. He was doubly glad he had helped them create this home. It was partly below ground, with a window latch on the ceiling. He knew that would keep out the malevolent spirits, the evil lurking about. The onions hanging from the rafters would also do the trick.

"Forgive me, dear mother. I do not wish such pain on any parent."

"Thank you, my prince. Perhaps someday soon you will know the beauty of fatherhood," their host stated. "It truly is a blessing from the gods. I wish the Great Mother did not have to call their souls back so soon. We are glad to have known our children and grandchildren. Some days, it seemed like our little Hayna had conversations with the goddess herself. She called her Ewa for some reason. Childish things. But the water called her. She could spend all day in those cool streams. Quite frightening for a man like me. I cannot stand the cold." Mock shivering in response to his own words, graying eyes looked upon the prince.

"An interesting story, indeed. I often wonder if children are not connected to the gods in a manner adults could never comprehend. Perhaps we simply outgrow our beliefs, no longer see the world with the innocence of youth. We grow too quickly, my father says."

"Prince Artasa, you are an intriguing man, full of wisdom," they smiled wistfully.

"Your prayers in the upcoming war would be greatly appreciated," he lowered his eyes and tilted his head low.

"Do not bow to us, Highness! You have it always, from us and everyone in this village," the woman cried.

"And for that, I am forever thankful," he replied warmly. "Now,

I believe I see my father and Aris with the cooked pork in tow."



After a night of feasting together with their hosts, the royals slept soundly while Aris kept watch. None knew where the king and the prince spent their nights, and none would. Their trails were kept secret, and as they traveled closer to the borders, ready for the attack, both ensured they were near their armies. Staying with the villagers afforded them certain luxuries they would otherwise have to forgo at camp or court. These moments were theirs alone, and they could learn much more by mingling with their people. There was absolute freedom in this. Hayadusta had insisted on coming along, but stayed back with the army, dressed as a warrior instead of a princess. Artasa had ensured their father agreed to this. His sister would not have fared well left alone at their capital settlement, inside tall stone walls without those closest to her. She did make for a striking warrior, though, he would admit. He feared any man who finally wed her would be grossly outmatched in all regards.

Aris, of course, was the best messenger they had and doubled as their guard for most of their days. No matter the dangers, no matter the obstacles, that boy would never back down. Artasa adored the youth and knew his sister favored him, as well. He wondered if he was sometimes jealous of the friendship the two shared. The king had little to say on the matter, though, and most accepted the relationship as platonic, one which any commoner wished to have.

"Aris, sit with me."

"Of course, Your Highness!"

Scampering over, Aris sat far enough to show his respect but close enough to engage in a more intimate conversation.

"Tell me, we have everything here. We are ever expanding to the north as well as to the south. We face a different clan every few

days. The moon does not complete a cycle before we are marching on a new region. But we are assimilating them into our world, into our lands. Each is different. This will be the first time we have fought with a tribe, a clan, a kingdom, which shares our pantheon. I am agitated about this battle with the Harrani. Why?"

"Because we share our gods. You said it yourself, Your Highness. And the rumors state..."

"Don't tell me what they say at court or gossip about in the village. I have heard it all. You have seen their king, correct?"

"Yes," Aris responded tightly.

"What are your thoughts?" If the prince noticed the lad's stiffening, he made no mention of it.

"He is a handsome-enough man. He is like you and I. Light of skin, fair of hair, blue of eyes. They say there is a fire burning in those eyes, but I was never close enough to see it. He is quite tall but not large in muscle. They say he is favored by the gods, that even the mountains bow before him and the streams part to let him pass. Of course, that is but a silly exaggeration. Then again, it is good to be wary of an enemy few can find fault with. From all accounts, he is a strong warrior, just, and a lover of all things beautiful. The Harrani often spoke of his peaceful nature. He is the only son of the late king, from what I have heard. Though there were whispers I came across about the late queen's infidelity. I do not know what else to report on, however. The man is well-loved and respected. Even if we conquer them, the Harrani are not likely to sit back and allow our reign. Such are my thoughts on this whole affair."

"You do not believe we should be attacking them?"

"No, sir, I don't. Personally, I believe it is a great sin, and we have no cause for this. It is folly. However, I am nothing but a servant of the royal family. My opinions matter not. In truth, from what I have seen and heard, we face a formidable foe who has utilized trade and negotiation with honeyed words to annex the southern and eastern clans. He might have fewer military victories, but it is said King

Arameni has not lost a battle yet. It would be wise to take great care in our approach."

"Yes, you are correct. I, too, have heard of the young king's victories, his headstrong but gentle nature. Some say he is a coward, but I find a certain beauty in the prospect of a king refusing to conquer lesser clans. It has a strange appeal. The land is as prosperous as they say?"

"Yes, quite. Their boats make it down to Babol, Msr, and Asha. They trade in so many interesting items. I do not understand why we have never extended a hand in friendship."

"You believe in life after death, Aris?"

"No, Your Highness. I believe we make our way down to the bosom of the underworld, embraced by unknown gods there for all eternity."

"Interesting. What do we do there?"

"I don't know. It baffles me as well to think about how many souls occupy that space."

Whooping in laughter, the prince stared deep into the fire before sobering. "What if we become nothing at all? Simply disappear like the fire does once the water douses it."

"Perhaps. I should hope Ar has other plans, but perhaps that underworld is where we originated from, and our lives will help define a new one yet to be born. It is impossible to know, and truly not something one must dwell on so much. The gods control each life, granting us our presence in this world before calling us home. When I think of the gods, I think of love. Just as a parent loves his or her child, so the gods love us. They will not wish pain on us, but they need us to grow, to become the best versions of ourselves. And so, we face our trials and are forced through near insurmountable obstacles."

"They created the basics of this world and required us to continue to build it." The prince smiled at the thought. It made their lives, their positions, less futile.

"Your Highness, I believe you're correct. The only thing we leave behind once we are gone is a memory, a footprint in this world. If we could carve out a new dynasty, which is something you may be able to do during your rule, then perhaps we do that which the gods hoped we would."

"For such a late hour, these questions dig a touch too deep. Perhaps we should rest, my young friend?" Standing up, he brushed himself off. Aris quickly moved toward the cots to ensure Artasa's comfort.

King Artash had long since retired, choosing to sleep in the darkest corner of the home. The window trap had been left open to allow for fresh air and moonlight to stream in. With war on the horizon, Haya's beams were a welcome sight. The elderly couple had decided to sleep outdoors for the night, enjoying the cool breeze. Summer months were the household's favorite, and the royal family enjoyed the perks of gentle weathers.

"Good night, Aris."

"Good night, Prince Artasa. I believe the gods have something quite special in store for you."

Chapter Eight

Conquest



Arameni gathered a large force to meet the Arani threat. Copper slashed with bronze, obsidian pierced hearts, and rivers of blood drenched the land beneath them. Riders trampled over poppies lining the riverbanks as far as the eye could see. As the day wore on, the rains poured with abandon. Soldiers slipped and fell in the mud, pushing onto drier land where they could find better footing. Arodi had set up traps, but it was unclear whether the downpour was help or hindrance once the mayhem began. Whereas the weeping weather might have spelled good omen and a path to victory for King Artash, Arameni hoped it was instead what would give them the opening necessary to fulfill their plans.

The Harrani king screamed out, furious, gritting his teeth against the surrounding misery; his black-tipped spear replaced by the blunt end of a short sword to knock the enemy unconscious without causing permanent damage. Maiming and wounding, yes, but he would not rule over a graveyard. Where the Arani saw this as a weakness, pushing forward, Arameni ensured his soldiers snuffed out as few lives as possible.

"Watch out!"

Swishing by his head was an arrow that lodged itself in the heart of a comrade. The sharp point had sliced against his cheekbone, just barely missing his eye. His helmet protected him from most attacks to the head, while his body was mostly well-covered; golden scale armor shielded his chest, with a leather jacket for added protection, while his lower body sported a red leather and gold-belted kilt. Anger bubbled beneath the surface, and a cry of rage sent him into the thickest mass of fighting, slashing at legs, unhorsing men twice his size. He might not have been exceptionally large in stature, but he was quick, and he would use that to his advantage. Narrowed eyes homed in on his target just before he screamed out a war cry. Three thumps against the shield followed close behind. In the distance, the drumming of the younger boys flanking the battle joined the zurna pipes.

"Kill their king!" The enemy, brethren from another tribe, wanted his head. Raising his eyes as he kept his head low, he pushed forward, leading his squad toward King Artash and his men. He scanned the battalions ahead for the prince. He tried to tune out the screams and grunts, the mud, with its slipping and falling; blood everywhere. War was glorified butchery, and Arameni focused on making it end.

"Arodi! To your right!"

Calling out a warning that most probably saved the general's life, Arameni swung his arm back, taking careful aim. Screaming in fury, he charged through enemy lines, sheathing the shortsword and grabbing the spear from the soldier at his side. He aimed low to pierce through legs and lower bodies, instead of hearts and heads. Despite the carnage, he had no intention of causing more harm than he should.

Steeling himself against the roiling in his stomach, the king tried his best to ignore the sudden decapitation of the soldiers near him as Arani troops swung battle axes in their direction. He blocked out the brutality surrounding him, grimacing as his mount slipped suddenly, nearly felling him.

"Ar have mercy on my men." He did not care to know how much

blood, sweat, and mud covered his own body. Arameni strengthened his resolve and pulled back from the mass of men hacking at one another. The dirt made it impossible to tell friend from foe at times. He would have to sound the victory horn quickly.

Moving around his protective corps, spear in one hand and shortsword at arm's reach, Arameni spotted a few of his kin commanding his units. The archers had moved behind his foot soldiers and were aiming toward the tail end of the enemy battalions.

"Your Majesty! Mercenaries!"

His mare neighed as he hastened her sideways, dodging deadly strikes from a northerner intent on unhorsing him. Before he could react, his personal guard had dispatched the mercenary, but it became clear Arania had become home to a number of swords-for-hire.

Tucking the information at the back of his mind, the king decided he would have to talk to his adviser about bringing in some interesting foreigners themselves. The aristocrats of his nation alone were not enough to keep winning military campaigns. Plus, the productive season was never a suitable time to leave home. Only the greatest of threats could bring Arameni's full might to the battleground. He would rather have a reserve of superior strength to bring in the element of surprise, as well. Hellin hoplites with sarissas and xiphos would be a great asset in skirmishes, he mused, before slicing at the arm of one rather peeved hoplite who would have been part of the phalanx they had crashed against earlier.

Deciding he had more than enough of this dance of death they had all joined in, Arameni narrowed his eyes and lifted an arm to wipe some of the sweat dripping down his forehead. The stench of human corpses had invaded his senses, and he knew it would take a good fortnight of intense bathing and therapeutic aroma sessions by the priestesses to rid himself of the feter of war.

"Arodi! Let's finish this!"

The general heard the call and echoed his affirmation, but he was

unhorsed and now fought with two blades of steel—prized possessions, which were newer acquisitions and intrigued the king enough to pursue the art of smelting on castle grounds. The first experiments had not been quite as successful, but these blades were some of the best they had managed to date. Arameni would ensure the experimentation continued once they had driven the invaders out of his lands.

It had been a long campaign for the opposing forces, which meant the Harrani held the advantage. When Arameni's armies attacked, the startled invaders tried to repel the obsidian-tipped and bronze-forged weapons in a dance of passion, just as the king finally spied their means to an end.

Quite unexpectedly, a break in the enemy front appeared; Arodi and a handful of others forged ahead, trampling over all in their path. They meant for Arania's prince, Artasa, whose deep golden hair was now matted in red and brown. Setting their plan in motion, Arameni fumbled for his horn and brought it to chapped lips, blowing a short command for his royal guard. They knew the strategy and closed in on the prince's own quadrant right after the archers standing at the ready near the bank brought down a shower of arrows. Distracted by the multi-pronged attack, the prince was suddenly left unprotected for mere moments that seemed to stretch for an eternity.

"Damn this rain," Arameni muttered as he locked eyes with his target. Annoyed at the worsening downpour, his heartbeat quickened to a deafening pace when he suddenly found himself thankful as the showers morphed to hail, much to the chagrin of the warriors battling for their lives. The sudden rise of mist did little to alleviate the confusion and disgruntlement erupting around him. With the lack of visibility and resounding mayhem, Arameni's forces were provided with enough of a cover to spirit away the wounded successor to the Arani throne, who moaned as he was roughly handled and pulled onto a Harrani mount, an arrow having clearly slashed his leg.

"We have him!"

The king heard the shouts as he dodged attacks and slashed at the oncoming enemy once, twice, then thrice, before leaving the battle in the capable hands of his soldiers and rejoining the special operations quadrant. His third-ranking officers might lead the lowest strata of his army, but these men made a career in the military and formed the core of his defense. He knew they were to be trusted as they were either hand-picked or volunteer conscripts, trained at the ready for all types of warfare. The half-naked and helmeted Araska tribesmen from the conquered regions were some of his favorite warriors, valued for their martial inclinations and vast experience on the battlefield. Among his foreign contingents, they were unmatched in strength and proficiency. Nodding to the generals he passed as he rode away from the flurry of activity, Arameni was more than ready to deal with the more diplomatic aspects of this campaign. Sighing, he hoped the next phase of his plan would finally bring them peace.

As the royal contingent mixed with the special forces now handling the prince rather roughly despite his bleeding body, the guarding priestesses who had been watching from the sidelines and saving their strength for this exact moment cast binding magic invoked by the powers of Haya to trap the young prince in an indestructible prison. As they moved away, there was a change in the battle behind them.

Looking back, Arameni noticed with satisfaction the moment the enemy realized what had occurred. Pushing ahead, he arrived at the camp across the river, his retinue following close behind. On the battlefield, weapons clattered to the ground, and the Arani howled at their loss, fleeing where they could and surrendering where they could not. King Artash screamed in pain as he tried to follow, but was continually pushed back by the confused hordes around him. The invaders were forced to retreat and return to their camp on the opposite riverbank, a short ways to the north. Meanwhile, Arameni's army followed in pursuit, only stopping when they reached the border of water, preferring instead to set up camp on the southern side.

"The prince is gone," some cried out as they managed to get

away.

"The prince is dead," rumors spread, whispers of despair.



Moments passed, trickling into more substantial periods. The little light available began to fade as the mists settled lower against the earth, obstructing all sight.

Suddenly, a man on horseback, carrying the golden symbol of Ar in the form of a pure gold sun, crossed over; a messenger sent under a banner of truce.

"I must bring news to your king!" The man was desperate to pass the scornful Harrani warriors.

"Good luck with that," the men snickered.

The priestess tending to a wounded soldier raised her brow. "At least you seem brave enough," she proclaimed before returning to her ministrations.

"It is of utmost importance, bearing the royal seal."

Arodi stepped forward. "Is that so, young man?"

"Yes, please allow me to share my majesty's message."

"Run to the river and back here again; I will decide then," he responded, quirking a brow. The blood and mud from the battle created a terrible image, brooking no resistance.

Sighing in defeat, the Arani peace bearer did as he was asked. Those watching knew he would take the embarrassment, as it was undoubtedly not the first time he faced such an initiation.

Panting hard by the time the pathetic fool obtained an audience with the king, he finally read the Arani king's proclamation in an unsteady tone of voice.

"Great and mighty ruler of the Harrani,

Son of the great God Ar and the Goddess Haya,
Victor of the battle between our two great nations,
And the magnificent presence among the realm of nobles.

Our great King Artash, son of the glorious God Ar and the merciful Goddess Haya, beseeches Your Majesty to consider an offer of eternal peace between our two nations, so that they may flourish as neighbors, as siblings, as friends and never as foe.

This treaty is to be concluded between Arania and Harrania, with a solemn promise to provide the illustrious king of such a magnanimous nation with anything that he so desires, so long as the young Prince of the Arani is released and allowed safe return to his lands.

For this gesture, Artash, King of Kings and Son of the Heavens, will forever be grateful.

With our deepest and most sincere gratitude,
The Arani Empire."

The message was received in the hall dedicated to diplomatic meetings within the fort, not nearly as magnificent as the quarters available in Aratta, the capital of Harrania. The man was pale, perspiring as the night wore on. None had bathed off the stench and grime of war, their very appearance enough to unsettle a god, let alone a lowly mortal. It was undeniably amusing for the Harrani to watch him squirm.

It felt like an eternity before Arameni spoke, clearly enjoying the play on words. He had been presented with a cuneiform inscribed tablet stating precisely that which the man had uttered with somewhat unexpected confidence. Quirking his lips into a half smile, he pretended to be gracious. His words, however, were anything but. Unfortunately for the Arani, Arameni was in a foul mood, having heard the tally of losses they took, which included several nobles of which he was fond.

"I fear you must return to your king with an answer that will

most definitely displease him. I have no intention of returning the boy to your people and lack for nothing. There is nothing you may offer me which I do not already have or would possibly desire from your land. The Harrani are rich in metal, in obsidian, in leather and gems. We have vineyards protected by our vast mountains and produce liquid strength unlike any other. We mine for gold and tin and copper. We have everything."

Paling, the man seemed ready to beg, unmindful of his shame. "Your Majesty, please reconsider."

"You invaded my lands; you caused the death of hundreds of my men. The selfishness of your king has increased the number of widows and orphans among my people. Unless you can right those wrongs, your prince can rot to death for all I care," he stated forcefully, fury in his words. His head ached, and he was beginning to see a red haze before him.

With the request of a king denied, the messenger was sent back with his gaze lowered, afraid of his monarch's reaction to the news. It would take a miracle to regain their royal bloodline now, those watching thought. Arameni had not indicated what he planned for the young Artasa, causing the Arani to fear the worst and beg for a miracle. King Artash was beside himself with worry. Sometimes the man bringing unwelcome news wondered if being a messenger would not put him in an early grave.



Just as the dawn had begun to lighten the heavy darkness of the sky, Hayadusta came near the shore. She could not sit back and wait for the messenger's response. She could not leave this in the hands of the men. Pushing her long braid behind her back, she resolved to do what she could for her brother. With beating heart and roiling thoughts, the princess approached the edge of the waters and called on Arameni.

She knew the soldiers would summon the king out to hear her

plea. As the sun broke over the horizon and quickly engulfed the world in a magnificent show of Ar's light, Hayadusta took a deep breath and prayed to Haya she would succeed where traditional diplomacy had failed.

She did not have to wait long before she spotted him riding toward the camp on the Harrani side, golden and mighty, and strangely clean. Not a streak of mud or blood in sight. She did not wish to dwell on that. Taking a deep breath, rubbing hands on her dress, and raising her voice, she spoke clearer than ringing bells, drawing the attention of all those within proximity.

"I speak to you, oh brave Arameni, for you have defeated the courageous Arani; come, listen to their bright-eyed princess and return the youth, my brother. It is unbecoming of heroes to destroy other great warriors or to take and keep them in enslavement so that two valiant peoples are consigned to perpetual enmity."



Those on the banks of the river, in the encampment and beyond, heard the young woman's request spoken in a voice so strong and true, the honesty and passion stirring emotions in all. It was the Harrani king's heart that she had to sway, however, and, in stark contrast to the events of the day before, there was not even a whisper in the wind.

Hearing the words presented in such a delightful manner, a plea by a maiden, no less, Arameni traveled down to the river. Maneuvering around his people gathered at the bank, he looked upon a most captivating creature. Startled, he pulled against the reins of his mare, eyes never leaving the figure of the woman a river-breadth before him. It was as if time itself had stopped. Her beauty was beyond expectations, as she seemed to embody the soul of Haya herself, bright and untouched.

She wore a gentle blue frock, both practical and maddeningly cinched at the waist, like a delectable gift from the gods. It was her

lyrical voice, however, with a depth that drew one closer and ensnared hearts with a single word, which enchanted him most. As his eyes trailed over her figure, it was the goddess who called out to his heart, the goddess who beckoned for him. The gentle breeze caught tendrils of her hair which had escaped her single braid; her dress was soaked and muddy as the river swelled and ebbed. He could not look away as he stood rooted to his spot, entranced by the scene unfolding before him.

"I want her," he whispered softly. In a moment of clarity, he recognized her and a destiny he newly understood. "She's the one!"

This image had long ago appeared in his imagination, in his dreams. She called to him from the mists, from the mountains, and now, when facing one another in the flesh, she called to him from the shores that separated the warring nations. She was his destiny; he knew this, and he wished to make her his, mark her as his own. The day still held the remnants of passion from the one before, of fury and adrenaline coursing through veins. Arameni blinked to ensure she was real and not a figment of his imagination from a sleep-deprived mind.

"I desire nothing but her," he ground out to one of his close military commanders and, upon making this confession, Arameni expressed his willingness to conclude the treaty with the Arani.

The man nodded, while Arameni's eyes remained fixated on the prize before him. On the maiden who would be his wife.

"Be quick!"

Arameni's sharp words sent the men into action.

A message was sent to the enemy king, this time retracting the previous statements and demanding the young maiden in return for the release of the Arani prince. Artasa would surely be a good trade, primarily when it was the sweetly beckoning ethereal princess one received in his stead. Surely, Artash would not refuse such a generous offer, Arameni speculated.

Arin, one of the young men he trusted more than most, rode up

beside him, staring ahead. "Will he agree?"

Having lost so many in battle, Arodi had his hands full with his duties, and it had been essential to appoint a new adviser, at least temporarily. Arin was proving a keen mind and a sharp eye. In time, he would rise in rank, the king mused. Arameni enjoyed surrounding himself with fresh minds and intelligent thinkers. More youth such as he would be a boon to the monarchy.

"The man would be a fool not to."

Yet trepidation formed. Kings were known to be fools, and he was no less of one for driving the bargain he was.

"My king, the messenger seems rather gloomy and has slowed his pace. I fear you have been rejected." The youth acknowledged from his side.

The king furrowed his brows. Of course, he should have expected that. Fool, it is. Nevertheless, he refused to give up.

"If I am to be rejected, I have a better offer to make..."

Mischief overtaking nobility, he suddenly kicked his beautiful mare's flank, grabbed the red leather rope studded with golden rings, and pushed the animal forward, over the rocks at the shallows and into the river.

A spectator would describe the golden-haired child of the sun as a sharp-winged eagle, soaring across the river, eyes fixed on his prize. A king undaunted by the contempt with which the enemy viewed him, who instead sought to abduct his new queen; a crime, perhaps, but an accepted one in these regions. It was indeed much faster to take what was yours than to wait to go through all the pleasantries dictated by tradition. He crossed the border, threw the red leather rope ahead of him and tightened it around the astonished young maiden's waist.

"Ah!"

Her sudden gasp and demure yelp added to the adrenaline pumping through Arameni's veins. He pulled hard and gathered

her before him on his saddle, but not before sorely bruising her tender skin through her light chamois dress. Her wince did not go unnoticed. As swiftly as he rode up, he retreated to his camp, gripping his conquest, a grin of triumph stretching ear to ear.

Riding away, Arameni noticed the approach of King Artash and heard the shaking voice behind him as the elder man reddened with anger. While the Arani soldiers scampered about, getting into formation, their king sped forward, hoping to stop the abduction. Arin had realized his king's plans and had already pulled together the archers, who, upon noticing the enemy's movements, let the arrows rain down behind the galloping mare. It was the desperate call behind him that reached the king's heart. It was a call which carried the sorrow of a father who had lost all that which was precious to him. Two of his greatest achievements. Two of his most precious jewels...



Meanwhile, a flabbergasted Hayadusta stared at her captor, trying to digest what had just happened. He had taken her from her people, plucked a flower from its bed. She was captive. She, who had refused the hand of princes and even kings, was a captive. Eyes wide, not with fear, but another entirely unaccounted emotion; she felt almost elated by this turn of events. He dared to do this, to not only steal her brother, but to take the treasured Arani princess as his bride. Was it even right to feel this excited?

"You will come to love me, Princess, of that I can assure you," he smiled gently, exuding confidence as he pulled her head under his chin. His warmth, combined with the protection of his body against the bite in the air that followed the storm, lulled her senses, and relaxed her pent-up nerves ever so slightly.

She tensed, clawing at the hand holding onto her sore waist. The leather was still digging in. Grinning down at her, he dropped a kiss on her forehead. How dare he? She truly did want to rebel.

There was something within her that decided to stay quiet for the moment, however.

Love him? He wished to have her love him? The revelation gave her as much pause as the shock of the situation itself. Perhaps she could come to love him? Her thoughts were unfocused as she tried to take in her surroundings. While her rational mind protested, urging her to fight against the sudden intimacy she had been thrust into, another more primal part of her was curious and saw this as a means to save her brother in the process.

Slowing his steed among his people as they crowded around the couple, Arameni spoke with a booming voice, pride etched in every word. Hayadusta looked up at the noble profile in awe. Strange as it was, she was still in shock, and he was utterly captivating.

"Today is a glorious day, my people! The Harrani have a new queen and I, as King of the Harrani, have claimed a prize worthy of a victorious commander. I feel humbled that Haya saw fit to grant me treasure, which not only stirs my heart, but is the very embodiment of our sacred goddess herself!"

She let out a shocked gasp. He looked to his people, but she could feel him taking in her every response. She was not moving, however. Not giving him much satisfaction. At least, she thought as such. Yet, the king laughed with abandon as the previous day's grief dissolved into a beautiful victory, conquest basked in while cheers erupted all around them and merry chatter changed the former atmosphere of mourning into one of hope and joy.

Focusing on the positive reaped from such a cursed battle, the princess was pleasantly surprised at the ready acceptance by these people her own had newly slaughtered without discrimination.

"You, my darling wife-to-be, shall be the happiest queen in the world," he whispered in her ear. "This is my oath, no matter how our union came to be."

It appeared the king's heart was soft and his desire to do good in this world was great. Hayadusta could only drown in the intensity of his gaze, strangely trusting her abductor would keep to

his promise and do right by her. Perhaps she had found her equal in this world, after all? The question came unbidden, and she nearly laughed to herself. The strong spinster princess was to be the bride of the enemy king. Aris would surely find great amusement in her predicament once he learned she was unharmed and assured of happiness.

"I think I might get used to you, but I really should put up a fight," she responded.

"Perhaps you should. At least, you can try," Arameni grinned.

"My father needs me."

"He shall do fine without you. I am positive."

"You will release my brother?"

"If you so will it."

"Is that a fair trade?"

"You speak the truth; I probably should send your father payment for you. It would be terrible of me as his daughter's husband to act otherwise." Perplexed by his words, she gasped when he cocked his head to the side with an eerily sad smile. "Do you truly value yourself so little?"

"My value has always been in the type of match I would make."

His silence stretched between them, and she wondered if she should have remained meek and pliable.

"What better match than this? We share gods, traditions, and cultural identities. Over the years, our people have simply divided in two. We even share common ancestors. I think it was a battle between brothers over the throne that divided them. Foolish men."

"You are correct. Logically, this is the best match."

Dismounting, he gently nuzzled the mare's black mane, thanking her for a job well done. This, of course, did not go unnoticed by the princess, but she held back her thoughts.

"Come, my dear; allow me to lead you to our humble castle for

the night. I am afraid it is but a small reflection of that which it should be, but we will soon arrive home. There, you will truly be happy. I am sure of this."

To her, it seemed as if he was trying to believe it himself.

"You seem troubled."

"Do I?"

"What thoughts are you hiding, my lord?" She tried to make her speech as soft and understanding as possible. If she were to be spending her life with this man, she should get to know him well and pushing him into sharing his innermost thoughts would be the best route if her plans were to succeed.

Bending slightly to kiss her cheek, and, seeing her lack of protest, moving his lips to her forehead once more, Arameni admitted, "The truth is that I could never forgive myself if my rash behavior brought shame and misfortune upon such a gentle and well-mannered woman."

She paused, trying to take this in. He waited patiently despite the tick at his temple and the movement at his throat. He was nervous, she realized with a start.

"If it is home enough for you, dear king, it will do perfectly for me, as well."

Placing a hand on the small of her back, he guided her through the fort. "Are you cold?"

"No, I believe I am quite alright."

"Looking at your mud-stained skirts, I believe you would be warmer without shoes and out of those soggy clothes," he stated, amused.

Cocking a brow, she looked at him squarely. "I will not share your bed nor strip for your entertainment; especially not before we are officially married, King."

Overcome with glee, Arameni smiled at the princess with such warmth, it caused a tingle to spread within her body. "I have no

intention of going against your wishes, my dearest lady. I shall leave for a time and send one of the priestesses in with a change of clothes. You are free to arrange the furs on the bed as you see fit. After all, I would never force myself onto the unwilling. However, I cannot say I do not look forward to a night of wedded bliss the moment we arrive home." His light jabs were low in tone, to stay the wagging tongues of those who watched the duo walk through the halls as if they were already wed. Hayadusta was surprised at her own ease of manner around this strange man who seemed to fit the image she had drawn in her mind so long ago. Aris would certainly not be amused, she thought with a small smile, wondering how the young man would respond to the Harrani king's overly familiar behavior. She would have to bring the boy to her side soon, either way.

"There is much we have yet to arrange. Certainly not the day we arrive, my lord. Think of all who await this moment." While the words themselves seemed tender, there was a bite in her tone. She smiled at him, however, and dispelled the confusion that had appeared in his eyes.

"As you wish, my queen. You will come to learn that I am a patient man. A few days will certainly not be a bother. On the contrary, it gives me the time necessary to become better acquainted with my lovely, honey-tongued bride."

Leading her into the section of the fort reserved for himself and his closest advisers, Arameni brought her into their room. Before she could utter a word, he pulled her wrist up for a kiss. "I will take my leave now, my sweet. Enjoy the ministrations of the priestesses while I am away."

Once he'd left, she allowed herself to collapse onto the bed hastily put together for a king, comfortable but modest. The furs were unbelievably soft, she thought, letting her fingers skim over them. She would have to introduce him to the shearing of sheep and the woolen blankets her people created from this act, however. While pelts were genuinely magnificent, linen-bound wool would be far more hygienic and easier to manage for everyone.

"Somehow, I believe the gods favor me," she thought aloud.

"Yes, I would agree that they do, Your Majesty," a voice responded from the doorway.

Quickly closing off the view from curious gazes, a priestess walked in with freshly laundered clothing to which clung the gentle scent of a gurgling spring. Placing it before Hayadusta, the woman bowed her head with respect.

"Thank you very much."

"You are very welcome, my lady," the stranger replied, radiant and gentle. Her voice emanated with a power Hayadusta had longed for over her lifespan.

"What kind of man is he?" She asked a loaded question, pregnant with possibility. The priestess understood her concerns, it seemed, and was undaunted by the audacity of the woman her king had brought home. Hayadusta's direct nature had caused problems in her court in the past, and she was afraid the priestess would scoff at her now. She was surprised when the answer was not only offered, but details also imparted. Their brethren were considerably more accommodating, it seemed.

"A kind man who is generous with his time and his emotions. He is a king who enjoys giving as much as receiving; however, gifts from foreign countries will always become a cause for exceptional mirth. I believe he once brought in an entire squadron of peacocks from Msr, and the court was nearly driven mad by their incessant squawking. He is quite stubborn, but that must have already become apparent to you, alongside his impulsiveness. He is a man who loves peace, however, and does not crave power, at least not in the traditional sense of the word. His people mean everything to him. He is strict in his requirements and expects all to do their very best, but he is also encouraging and ready to lend a hand when necessary. All who know him love him. Who could not love a pious king who is fair in judgment and brimming with intelligence?"

"Perhaps I will love him as well, then," blushed Hayadusta, imagining days of trading thoughts on all matters in life.

"I am almost positive you will, my lady. We would only be happy for you both."

As the priestess gathered herself and stepped out, her handsome husband let himself into their room. Noticing she had not yet changed, he gave her another few moments before returning.

"I do not believe I have ever felt such complete joy," stated Arameni, gathering her in his arms.

"I am delighted to hear that," she smiled back with ease.

"Are you, my little siren?"

"Siren? Are they not part of Ponti lore?"

Hayadusta tried to imagine herself as a sea creature who lured men to their deaths through irresistible song. "You think I will be the death of you?"

Laughing, Arameni regarded her with playful eyes. "You might, my sweet."

"Fear me, King of the Harrani!" Teasing him with a smile of her own, she pretended to wield a sword, dropping into the proper stance.

"You have good form, my lady." Parrying her imaginary attack, he lunged with one of his own, which she easily sidestepped. "I see we might have to try this with real swords the next time around," he winked.

Before she could strike once more, imaginary weapon or not, he pulled her in for a searing kiss. Fingers tangled in her silken strands, lips slanted and persistent in their passion. Lightly running his tongue over her lower lip, he demanded entry, deepening the incredible sensations assaulting them both. Hayadusta had never been so thoroughly kissed before. Men had tried to steal a peck once or twice, but she had immediately rebuffed them. This, however, was mind-numbing. She almost did not realize that it was indeed she who was moaning, arms tight around her abductor's neck as her fingers held onto a fistful of golden strands. Her body seemed

to go weak with pleasure, her legs shaking as she absentmindedly wondered whether she could stand on her own. As he skillfully moved hands against her back, she gasped for breath before returning the kiss with unbridled enthusiasm. The sudden pulsing low in her belly was so foreign that she might have pushed him away had he given her half a chance to do so.

Tingling sensations radiated through her body and he had crushed her so close; she was unsure where she ended, and he began. It was as if they were one and the same in that moment. Was that her heartbeat? Why was she dizzy? Her thoughts went blank as she succumbed to the sensations his touch invoked. Dear Haya, was this natural?

"Are you all right, Princess?"

"Trying to be," she whispered, breathing hard. "I do not believe I gave you permission to do that, however."

Frowning, Arameni stepped away as she looked up at him. She could feel the flush in her cheeks and tried to hide her embarrassment behind cool words.

"You liked it well enough, my dear."

"Yes, but I did not want it."

"My sweet, I am to be your husband. I can kiss you when I wish to."

"No, you may not. You abducted me. We are, as of yet, unmarried. I would have preferred a hint as to your intentions before you took such liberties," Hayadusta countered, knowing she was not being entirely fair but unsure how to conduct herself otherwise.

Arameni looked puzzled and perhaps a little angry. "You expect me to ask your permission?"

"When in public, you would not go beyond a peck. That is understandable, and I know society expects it of their king. In private, however, I would ask for you to at least check to see if I am

ready for such advances."

She was quivering, which caused Arameni's eyes to widen.

"Did I frighten you?"

"That is beside the point."

"Is it? It was your first genuine kiss, was it not?"

Chin raised in defiance, she refused to answer.

"Why are you acting in such a manner?"

"At least show me some semblance of respect."

It appeared as if he wished to say something. Instead, shaking his head, he seemed to think better of whatever argument had been brewing in his mind.

"As you wish, my lady. I will not touch you again."

As he moved toward the bed, she bit her lip. She had expected a full altercation, a battle of words and wits. She wanted to see him beyond angry, wanted to know how he would act around her when in a rage. However, her words seemed to have cooled him down instead, and he quietly left her there in the middle of the room, unsure of what to do next.

"Why are you not yelling at me?"

"Did you prefer I did?" He raised a brow at her words, sitting comfortably on the bed. "Come sit by me, love."

"You call me love..."

"You are a woman easy to love." He flashed her a smile so sweet, it fairly melted her on the inside. Dear Haya, what was he doing to her?

"You cannot love me."

"No?"

"You do not know me."

"I will come to know you very well, I promise," he smirked,

raising her ire.

"I will not consummate our union tonight."

"I did not intend to force the issue," he replied saucily.

Confusion etched on her features, she decided it was best to join him. She felt confident he would not touch her unless she made the first move now. It was a minor victory, but one she relished. She now counted herself among the lucky few who married men of such honor.

"You mean it?"

"I hope to make you love me, my heart. Violence has never been the means to a woman's heart, I have found."

Tilting her head to get a better look, she sighed. "I did enjoy it very much, but yes, it frightened me. It was as if I was soaring and falling at once. A wounded eagle comes to mind."

Laughing now, he tousled her hair, much to her chagrin. "My innocent beauty."

"It seems my words have pleased you, my lord."

"You cannot imagine how much. Would you care to discover more about how one feels when both soaring and falling?" His teasing words warmed her body once more, and it was all she could do not to run away from the turmoil within.

"I would rather talk tonight if you would allow that instead."

Smiling fondly, he pushed himself back onto the furs, beckoning for her to join. A puppet in the hands of her lover, she found herself following him and settling in his arms. The heat radiating off his body soothed her in a way she could never have imagined.

"What is love, exactly?" She asked so timidly, he could barely suppress his mirth. She could see the smile tremble on his lips, his body shake slightly with it.

"An unconditional giving of happiness, I presume. Perhaps it is more than that, but in the simplest description, I would say it is an

individual's deepest desire to bring the one they hold so dear insurmountable joy."

"Intriguing. I always assumed it was a more selfish emotion, focused on taking more than the giving aspects. My parents shared a deep love from all accounts, and my father's obsession with the woman he called his queen was made so very clear. He could never forget her. I assumed it was love."

"It is, I think. Love and obsession are so completely intertwined, I believe, that it is impossible to separate them. The obsession should be as healthy as possible, however. For example, now that I have you, I would never let you go. I have fallen in love with everything, from your beauty to your dignified mannerisms, to the little teasing grin I saw pull at those berry lips when you thought I could not see it today. I am simply obsessed with the person that you are and hope to learn more during each day of our lives together."

"You, my dearest king, are smitten."

"Like a pup with his master," he grinned.

"Mistress," she teased, beaming.

He bellowed with laughter and pulled her close, planting soft kisses on her forehead. "Mistress."

"I believe I am the happiest I have ever been right now, as well," she grinned impishly before burrowing deeper into his arms.

The monarchs' fledgling joy was contagious. Soon the whole of the land would rejoice with the announcement of such a blessed union and the ascension of a queen who was as sweetly divine as the Mother who had begotten their ancestors.

Chapter Nine

Wedding



In a gesture of goodwill, the following morning Arameni ordered Arodi to prepare the bride price.

"You wish to pay him as well now, my king?"

"Dear friend, silver is customary, and my nobles or even the peasants will not outdo me. Ensure you include both silver and gold, as well as some of our prized red leather. Its absolute value should be enough to appease the king's pride. Chests of lapis lazuli and the blue-tinted obsidian should be well regarded, as well. Furthermore, I'd suggest freeing the boy and only leaving his hands bound as you send the package over," he stated.

"As Your Majesty wishes."

"Oh! Also, make sure he's given new garments, befitting the brother of my beloved."

"Of course, my king," Arodi bowed, before hurrying to his tasks.

Smiling at the bright sun overhead, Arameni inclined his head in reverence to his god before trotting up the small mountain overlooking the fort to join his lovely bride.

"I am surprised you made it up here while still breathing

without wheezing," she raised a brow teasingly.

"You wound me with your doubt, *hokis*," he responded.

Eyes widening, Hayadusta asked wonderingly. "You know words of the ancient language?"

"A few which have been passed down to me. It is customary to retain education under the tutelage of the Arorti, after all. Endearments, most especially," he said, taking a seat and trying to keep from looking down. He might be a fearsome warrior, but heights were not his forte.

"Then I would love it if you use them often, *hokis*," she tried out the strange sounding word. He told her it meant 'my soul' and seemed to fit their budding relationship rather well. Arameni vowed to shower her in endearments, teaching her what he knew from the language long forgotten by most. *Sers*, my heart. *Anoushs*, my sweet. *Hokyag*, my little soul. She tried them all with a heavy accent he found so very endearing.

"Will your father stop the war now, my fair lady?"

Smiling, Arameni looked forward to a pleasant conversation. He discovered over the course of the night how the woman before him in the embroidered blue dress of expensive linen, for blue was most certainly her color, burned as bright in mind as she was luminous in aura. He would organize lavish feasts and sacrifice bulls at the altar of the gods for this blessing.

She tilted her head, attention on his words.

"Your brother has safely returned home, along with a luxury of presents. It appears you have been bought as well as abducted, my sweet enchantress."

"And do you expect me to be compliant, King?" She teased in kind, grinning as she sat with her husband-to-be over the edge of the mountain, inhaling the sweet scent of a victory-ensured peace.

"Never," he laughed, rubbing the pad of his thumb over her dainty fingers. There were a few scars there he would ask her about

later.

Her timid smile threatened to undo him.

"This is beautiful... here and now," Arameni sighed, knowing there was something on her mind.

"Yes, and after what occurred yesterday, the landscape is ever more magical. Something mystical in the breeze. We are a bit of a walk from the fort, however. Will they not miss us?"

"Today is a day of celebration. Of calm; of healing." Looking toward her, he moved his hand until their fingers laced together. "What is it you fret about, *sers*?"

Smiling at his advances, and hopefully at his use of endearments, she sighed. "It is a wonder to me how a man such as yourself refuses to finish off my family and my father's armies. We still pose a threat, and I know you certainly could do it. You have two royals enslaved; the morale of your troops is high while the morale of my own has disintegrated into ashes. My people will not fight a losing battle, especially since there was much trepidation about it from the start. All this has not escaped my notice. The fact that you refused to take such a step... well, my resolve is only strengthened to join my hand with yours."

Overcome with emotion, Arameni brought her hand to his lips, smothering it with kisses. "I only wish for peace. Moreover, now that you are with me, your happiness is above anything else. I knew you were mine the moment I spotted you, the moment I heard your lyrical plea."

Leaning against him, Hayadusta rested her head against his shoulder, watching the birds fly over the valley below them. "Lyrical?"

"Like a poetess. It was impossible not to be drawn in by your choice of words and phrase. As I mentioned last night, you are my siren."

Laughing lightly at this, she admitted, "I was quite nervous and doing my best to sound as beautifully diplomatic as possible.

Though I do not know if I should take offense when you call me a siren. I begin to ponder on your death too much," she teased.

"You succeeded in capturing a husband with such delicate diplomacy, *Sird*, dear heart. Your tutors must be especially proud," he grinned happily, nuzzling against her gold-spun hair.

"I want us to build something new," she stated after a pause.

"You have my undivided attention."

"If we are truly to join as one..."

"I believe at least part of that promise was fulfilled last night, my treasure," he winked.

Swatting him playfully, she lightly kissed his cheek.

"Careful how you speak to me, King, or I might enjoy pushing you off this cliff a little too much."

Eyes widening, he smirked before stealing a proper peck.

"Go on, then."

"The Arani and Harrani share most traditions, share their gods, and share physical attributes. We are the same. There is no reason our borders cannot intertwine, creating a larger, more prosperous state. I believe it would be something we can approach my family about. Father can live a comfortable life in his castle, with his servants and slaves. Artasa would be free to take a wife, enjoy the freedom of life without the constraints of kingship. You and I would rule both lands under a single name and flag. We share nearly everything anyhow. I believe it is a logical conclusion to this union. The divide is generations old, so long ago that none knows the true cause. I believe it is time to right the wrongs of ancestors past; do you?"

"Intriguing, my queen. You agree to this marriage, then?"

"Would I be considering such things if I did not? Do not ask silly questions, my dearest king."

Throwing his head back in laughter, Arameni could feel his

abdomen knotting up in mirth. She was perfect. No doubt about it. Sharp-tongued, quick-witted, and deadly in her acceptance of her responsibilities, it seemed. He reckoned he could always count on her loyalty, as well.

"Never leave me, woman."

Blushing at the compliment, she lifted her face to the blazing sun. "Ar brought us together. Haya sanctified our union. I would not leave you, even if my life depended on it."

Suddenly sobering, he replied. "Should your life ever depend on it, you will protect yourself. Understood?"

"You ask me to leave you should I be in danger?" Her eyes reflected a reluctant understanding.

"I will always come back to you if I can. This is the only thing I ask of you. The only thing that would put me at ease should I need to protect our family. Run. Do not be brave and do not sacrifice yourself for me. I would not forgive you for it. Live. Promise me?"

It seemed she understood the gravity of the emotions displayed by the man bearing his heart before her, the enigma of a husband who could be stern and stoic one moment, but also fall over in hearty laughter the next. She had no choice but to agree when he looked upon her in such seriousness, and he knew it. He held his breath, waiting for her answer.

"Yes, I will protect myself to the best of my abilities. However, do not dare put me in such a situation!"

Lowering his head slightly, he promised to do his best. "Now, time for the feast!"

"Finally, you feed me!"

"My queen, we must watch your figure," the king exclaimed in mock horror.

Tittering, Hayadusta asked for the details. "I expect you will have to roll me over when we move, soon enough. We shall have music?"

"Of course! Three days before I make you my queen! The zurna and dhol will liven up the party. In the morning, it will continue when the sun breaks the horizon, at which point the bull sacrifice shall begin, heads facing the east as tradition dictates." Cocking his head at the image of the dainty woman so full that she could not walk, he found himself profoundly amused. Before he could retort, she continued with her line of questioning, a curious kitten with mysteriously changeable eyes. Swallowing back his amusement as he dusted them off, he hoped she would retain this childlike innocence over the many summers he expected to stand by her side.

"Will they shave your stubble? Cut your hair?"

Forgetting his resolve to keep his expression calm, he rumbled in laughter, more than happy to indulge her. "While the musicians sing and play, of course! Before we are sent to the baths for thorough cleansing, and you are treated to your own bath and henna ritual."

Her eyes alight at the thought of such pampering, Hayadusta stared at the sun with a joyful smile. He would shave a summer off his life to know her thoughts now.



The Harrani king rode into the temple courtyard, his beautiful mare saddled in gold. Beside him, Hayadusta was clad in a beautiful red silk dress, belted with gold-embellished red leather, the embroidery in gold thread striking against the lightweight fabric hugging every last inch of her figure. It was strangely more revealing than she had expected. More comfortable than most pieces she'd owned.

They made their way to the Sacred Elder of Ardajar, the Arorti, to be blessed by the gods. The princess's gentle smile as she rode alongside her husband-to-be was as radiant as the morning sun, pearly and evanescent, a glow of happiness enveloping her very being in such a manner that guests in attendance had to wonder if

she were not Haya incarnate herself. It was rare to find love in war, and yet a spontaneously courageous king had won the heart of the strong noblewoman with a sharp mind to complement his own. To make her queen and always ensure her place by his side was the least he could give in return for her unwavering heart.

Sliding off his saddle, Arameni turned to Hayadusta, eyes ablaze with an emotion that she was thoroughly unaccustomed to and trying to decipher for the past three days. Looking at him in that moment, wearing a tunic of white silk with gold embroidery and the thread dipped in bull's blood tied tightly to his jewel-encrusted belt, passion and excitement in his eyes, her heart sped, as she knew hers reflected the same emotions for the man she had so quickly succumbed to. It was disconcerting, but she would get through this. She would be the queen. His queen.

As if reciting the lyrics to a bard's story, he spoke loud and clear for all those around them to hear. "My dearest princess, I am but your servant for the moment and for all of time. Please take my hand, a show of respect and a vow of fidelity. Allow me to present you as my chosen bride to Ar, so that he may bless our children with strength, intelligence, and honor, and to Haya, so that she may bless our children with kindness, compassion, and sharp wit. From this day forward, you are the wife of my heart and the mother of my country, to every man, woman and child we strive to protect throughout our rule."

Beaming at the man before her who embodied her hopes and dreams, Hayadusta took his extended hand, fingers intertwining. She was immediately pulled into his embrace, carried up the temple steps where the Arorti stood with the royal crowns directly before the fire-lit sacred pit, the obsidian and gold dagger in his hand, and the bull ready for slaughter by his side. Setting her softly on her silk-bound feet, Arameni took the queen's crown and, placing it on her head, uttered his vows:

"My ethereal beauty, Hayadusta, I take you today as my bride and my wife, the queen of our combined lands this day sanctified with the name of Hayara. I, a servant to Ar and Haya, do swear to

protect, honor, and cherish you until the day we are parted by death and none other. I vow to be a king fit not only to rule the people around us, but to carry your love as a token for all my days. With this crown, I make you my queen and my wife. With my words, I seal my fate."

With a smile threatening to split her cheeks and eyes glistening with unshed tears, Hayadusta returned the gesture by placing the king's crown over his temple, speaking her vows:

"My courageous king, Arameni, I take you today as my husband, my sovereign, and the only ruler of my heart. You may have taken me by force, but it is through my own will that I speak these words to you. I vow to honor your home always, to cherish you as only a wife may, to give you children worthy of Your Majesty, and to stand by your side until death and none other would dare to part us. With this crown, I call you my king and my husband. With these words, I seal my fate."

A priestess poured the blessed wine into a golden goblet studded with lapis lazuli, rubies, and shards of obsidian. Hayadusta took the goblet and offered it to her husband for the first drink. Instead, Arameni tilted the cup to his queen's lips, allowing her to enjoy the sweet taste of the elixir of life, cultivated from their lands. Hayadusta returned the favor and, moving closer, lightly licked the stray droplet that had escaped and made its way to the side of his lip, to the amusement and cheers of their people present at the ceremony. The bold queen, they would say, and in the summers to come, love her greatly for it. Today, however, while some murmured on the sidelines, not quite sure if they approved, the king took great delight in the passion burning within his wife. She vowed then that he would never tire of her; she would see to it.

Someone started the chant, "Kiss the queen!"

"Kiss her!"

"Seal the marriage with a kiss!"

Laughing at the absurdity of the moment, Arameni winked at his wife before capturing her lips in a kiss so fiercely wanton, the

crowd quieted for a moment before the cheers became near deafening. Enemies had become lovers; two nations had collided and morphed into one. The royals embodied their gods and, in that moment, even seemed to emanate an otherworldly glow. Peace would reign once more, the lands would yield a good harvest, and the people would prosper. Hope prevailed that day and through the following forty days of celebration, for the nation would undoubtedly rejoice throughout what they called the moon span of honey. Mothers hugged their babes to their breasts, men lifted wives into their arms, and love was expressed as the heart saw fit. The gods embodied this divine emotion, and the people would bask in it.

As tradition dictated, those present from the queen's side were embraced by those from the king's, with King Artash and Prince Artasa watching from their perch closest to the couple. They had arrived quietly and planned to leave without attracting too much attention to themselves.

Hayadusta had noticed her family, but today was not their day. She would visit them soon enough. At this moment, her loving husband commanded her regard.

"I believe our people are feeling the effects of great euphoria, *sirds*," Hayadusta murmured, holding her king's forearm tightly.

"It appears you are correct, *hokis*," smiled Arameni fondly, tucking her head under his chin as he embraced her instead. Then, from within the folds of his tunic, he brought out a single golden band, hand carved to perfection. Looking at it curiously, Hayadusta wondered aloud.

"How lovely. What is it for?"

The Arorti, understanding his king's intentions, warmed the dagger with the sacred fire which had been burning in the center of the temple throughout the ceremony and passed it through the ring. Chanting with a lyrical voice, the gold was blessed, and the warmth of the blade seemed to bring the images meticulously embossed on the metal to life.

Taking the ring from the dagger, Arameni pulled Hayadusta's hand to his lips. Planting light kisses along her fingers as she watched with a quirk to her lips, he finally slid the ring on. It was slightly large, but the goldsmith would fix that quickly. Hayadusta had learned she married a man of great taste; she was sure the carvings would be left immaculately unscathed.

"In Msr, there is a tradition to utilize hemp and roots in the making of rings to solidify a marriage. Instead, I had a beautiful golden version created, with a master craftsman documenting your abduction and ascent to queenship most meticulously. I hope it is to your liking."

Examining the ornament closely, she could barely keep her awe in check. "It is wonderful! I am in love with its texture, its design. It is quite incredible!"

"That means you like it?"

"That means I shall never remove it!" She responded with joy as she reflected on the perfection of her wedding.

Clearing his throat, the Arorti called for attention, starting his prayers as the bull was brought before him. Gripping the dagger tightly, he deftly slit the animal's throat and allowed it to bleed out, the blood sacrifice anointing the couple before him.

"Blessed be the children of Haya. Blessed be the children of Ar. May the blood that flows here bind you for eternity. May the meat served tonight bring you strength and your kingdom glory. Let the pains be few and the joys plenty. We beseech the gods to protect our monarchs and give them a long life full of happiness. May they be blessed with a court full of youthful laughter and live to a ripe old age, enjoying their children's children and their children following."

"Thank you for your blessings," they whispered.

Taking her hand, king and queen walked down the high steps gingerly; they were meant to ensure those who walked up always knelt to the gods. Now, it appeared as if they knelt to their people

as well, an unspoken promise to always protect them, to never let them down.

Loyal servants dropped coins over their king's head, blessing the love between them. The people quickly joined in, in what was known as a shower of gold. The queen's chambers would be showered in pearls as well, signifying abundance and fertility. Mixed with the jewels were sun-dried fruits and sheaves of wheat. The kingdom would flourish, Hayadusta thought, while enjoying the blessings of the people. For once, she would be the one ruling, a worthy husband by her side.

As the royal couple saddled their gold-laden horses once more, the crowd followed on foot, calling out fervently.

"All hail the king! All hail the queen! All hail the Golden Couple!"



In the distance, someone struck the stone drum thrice, a practice ensuring the Gods blessed the union. The strikes of the stone drums resonated across the country as the elders and priests all joined in, commemorating the most joyous day in the combined kingdoms. In the newlyweds' minds, it was the gods who caused the drumbeats. So engrossed were they in the sacred ceremony, none noticed the lack of lightning.

Arameni led his wife to the river where they met. "As a final seal of our marriage, let us ride alongside the river, cross at the borders of our lands and ride back to this spot. Exchanging shores, we will then unite our territories in their entirety and call it our blessed home, Hayara."

Agreeing to this enthusiastically, Hayadusta kicked her stallion and rode in the direction her husband indicated. Grinning back to her amused king, she called, "Now the challenge remains as to who shall reach the end first!" With a wink, she galloped off.

For half a day they rode along the borders which had once separated the two lovers, crossing over at different intersections before turning back. It would take many days to traverse the whole of the land, but this ceremonial ride spread word of their union and truly joined them as one. Over the coming forty days, they would spend a fortnight traveling north to south before taking time over the next moon spans for another foray from east to west. By dusk, they returned to their starting locations, having garnered the support of both their peoples; hand-in-hand they made a final crossing to both sides, confirming once again their promises and ensuring the link in their futures.

Cheers erupted from amongst the populace, and the feasting began. The royal couple rode for days before reaching the main settlement where the tall stone walls of the castle loomed, stopping at the gates to dismount and walk into the courtyard together; this home now belonging to them both. It was tradition to have the queen take her first step into her husband's home on foot, as a sign that she would cherish all that was his and care for it as if it were her own.

As Arameni led his new queen toward the gates, seven priestesses greeted the royals. Wearing their hair in braids, and dresses of linen embroidered with gold, they stood at the ready to serve as confidantes and protectors of the queen. The eldest priestess brought forth a clay pot of butter.

"We bow before you, Queen of the Harrani and the Arani, Uniter of the Kingdoms, and Mother of Hayara. May the butter we anoint you with now ensure your loyalty to our combined nation; may your fingers always be oiled, and the gates doused in this butter churned by hand, bring the blessings of Ar and Haya to our realm. Please accept this humble gift. For the sake of a prosperous nation, know that we will all do our best. Welcome to your new home!"

With these words, the women all inclined their heads, bending slightly at their waists, braids falling forward, golden and bronzed tresses nearly touching the grounds beneath them.

"I thank you greatly for this kind and generous welcome. My

dearest messengers of Haya, I beseech your support in the summers to come, to protect our people from the days of cold and darkness, the Days of Chari. I ask for your assistance in growing our barley, our wheat, and our orchards in the Days of Ari, so that the elixir of life and liquid bread may forever grace the tables of our people. Should we stand together, should we fight together for a better world, we shall reap the rewards together. I am sure your visions could attest to that." She smiled in response and lightly inclined her head in respect. The women before her held godly powers and should always be treated as such.

"We are at your service, my queen," the elder stated.

"And for that, the royal family is grateful," she smiled back.

Stepping forward, one of the younger girls held out a pomegranate of such beauty, Hayadusta stared in astonishment. She smiled, stating, "This is the finest from this year's harvest, my queen. I hope it is to your satisfaction?"

"Of course! It is truly the most exquisite I have ever beheld!" Holding the pomegranate reverently, she knew what was expected next. It was customary for the bride to break the pomegranate, ensuring fertility and guardianship against the evil eye, the jealousy of mortals.

Throwing the red fruit against the ground as they stood before the gates, Hayadusta's pomegranate broke in two, the seeds spilling around it. It was not the splatter she expected, but she grinned ecstatically anyhow. She would ensure their life together would be long and fruitful.

Walking into the courtyard of her new home, a lavish feast greeted her. The lavash flatbread was in abundance, but the cakes were what caught her eye alongside the bread infused with pomegranate seeds. Seeing as she loved this particular symbol of the country, Hayadusta enjoyed every pleasant moment of her wedding rituals. She could already feel her mouth watering at the sight of the table laid out before them. Looking to her husband, she realized he was just as impatient to get his hands on every

delectable morsel. Suddenly, she noticed the red and green fruits lining the edges of the table. They looked oddly familiar, but she could not remember where she might have encountered one.

"What are those lovely round fruits, husband?"

"Apples? Of course! Women are normally introduced to them upon marriage. See? We will have a whole apple orchard planted on the morrow as a gift from the people. It is said to bring fertility to a family, much like the pomegranate," Arameni replied.

"Does it taste as good as it looks?" she asked, transfixed.

"I believe my queen must tell me that herself," he winked back.

Bringing the apple to her lips, Hayadusta bit into the hard flesh, feeling the juices trickle down onto her chin. Closing her eyes, she savored the texture, the flavor, the pure perfection of an apple. She had tasted this before, especially when cooked into pastry, but she could not remember it teasing her senses like this. This was simply divine.

"You like them?"

"I love them!" She responded enthusiastically, eyes twinkling as she took another bite.

"Then you will be pleased to know the Harrani have been trying different methods of growing apples and our orchards are—and I am being quite humble in this regard—the best in the world. I promise to bring you to some of my favorite places to pick them right off the trees." Beaming proudly, he stole a bite from his wife's portion. Closing her eyes as she enjoyed the sweet flesh of the fruit, she resolved to ensure both Arani and Harrani lands were covered in apple orchards. As the trees of life, it was important for their combined populace to enjoy life's blessings.

Turning to the table once more, she spied something else that intrigued her. The queen was undoubtedly enjoying this feast, and she knew it made her husband happy.

"What sweet bread!"

"That, my love, is known as gata. It is a sweet cake with a filling created from flour, butter, and apricot nectar. See how ornately it has been decorated? It is a specialty of the women in the nearby villages, and it's become common practice to include it on every wedding table," he explained.

"It is simply scrumptious! I feel I can eat this every day..."

Laughing at her blunt outburst, he brought her palm to his lips. "My sweet wife, I promise I will think you are beautiful no matter how much weight you put on because of these pastries. So long as I don't have to roll you out the door, of course," he whispered against her ear, causing her face to flush bright red at the reference made to her previous teasing.

"Your Majesty!"

"Have I mentioned I enjoy vexing women who turn such a specific shade of red, my queen?" He grinned easily, basking in the moment.

Suddenly lighting up with a mischievous glint in her eyes, she whispered, "Do we enjoy the art of lovemaking before or after we eat our fill? I could have dessert all evening."

"You little wench!" Roaring with laughter, the king tossed his giggling wife over his shoulder and strode into the castle, with Arodi already clear on the message they gave him: none shall disturb the lovebirds this evening and perhaps for a few days afterward.



For forty days and forty nights, the kingdom was driven by revelry, joy, and all forms of celebration. The royal courtesans joined the people in providing and receiving pleasure, while everyone enjoyed the gifts their gods had provided them. The feasts extended across the land, with tables of food and drink placed in the central square of each village; older women happily recounted

stories of eons past, while children danced and played around fires that roared with abandon.

The Khorovahayr, the priest who tended to the provision of the royal feast, dutifully sacrificed the lambs brought to him, catering to the population enough food to be worthy of the gods themselves.

With the coming of each dawn, from the rooftops the people sang, calling for the health and longevity of their monarchs, repeating over and over for the sun to blaze.

"Hail to the dawn! Hail to the dawn!

"Hail to the rising sun!

"May it give plenty of sun to our king.

"Hail to the dawn! Hail to the dawn!

"Hail to the rising sun!

"May it give plenty of sun to our queen."

As the forty days came to an end and each returned to their work, the people noticed an incredible sight. Their harvest continued to yield over the following moon spans, the snows were delayed; the winds had died down to a whisper, the streams overflowed, and it seemed as if the earth rejoiced alongside her people. The mines were improved upon; the fields were plowed and readied for the season of frost not too long to come, and there was so much food to fill the granaries, they would not starve a single day this winter. Unfortunately, nobody considered how such abundance and sense of security would attract uninvited guests and bring a sea of blood and despair in its wake.

Chapter Ten

Golden Years



Hayadusta knew bards would sing of the glorious achievements of their king, the kind and faithful heart of their queen, and of the treaty signed within a fortnight of her abduction between the two kingdoms. King Artash had agreed to abdicate and live peacefully with his concubines, wanting for nothing but an estate large enough to be considered a domain of his own. A retirement of sorts, but where he held power and sway as one of the realm's top advisers. Artasa was sworn in as protector before his sister and his former enemy, now turned brother. Peace was all he had ever wanted, and the two had made it possible. In the prince's heart, he knew the gods were pleased. That alone was enough to earn his agreement, as well as his unwavering loyalty.

Negotiations were thus concluded, opening the borders. Cartographers began to draw the Hayaran territory, a fitting name for their united nation. Haya and Ar had brought them together. What better way to honor their gods?

Before the wedding, King Artash had required some coaxing to accept his only daughter's betrothal and marriage to a king who outsmarted so powerful a ruler. Having already annexed seven clans and smaller kingdoms, he had not expected for the Harrani to

survive the onslaught, nor for the Arani to give in. Arameni had made it clear he was quite fond of the man himself, and knew the elder had accepted him to some extent, as well. Artash had even admitted as much, concluding that the Arani had won the war the moment he spied his daughter laughing in such abandon by the Harrani king's side. This, he had admitted, was the truest victory for a parent.

"Father, you look well," stated the new queen, kissing her sire on the cheek. They had come to visit him. Arameni smiled and inclined his head slightly, standing by the ribbon-decorated olive and apricot trees just outside the main doors.

As custom dictated, celebrating the New Year was an incredibly auspicious time, full of feasting, presents, and intriguing traditions. The Arani had discovered similarities in this, as well, particularly this joyous celebration which took place on the warmest and longest day of the summer cycle. It was clear how the days shortened soon afterward, and the icy winds began to blow in certain regions.

"Daughter, you decide to drag that man in here, as well?" he admonished mockingly, earning a light pinch on his arm.

"Do be nice! It is a day of celebration!"

Laughing in the background, Arameni approached the older man for a hug. Finally releasing a frustrated sigh, he accepted the embrace from his son-in-law and king, a quirk to his lips as he pulled away.

"You are right, little crane. He is a fine man and a fine ruler. I hope his intentions stay true. May the new year bring with it many blessings."

"Always, Father," the two answered together, quickly looking at each other and falling into peals of laughter.

"Children rule this land," Artash sighed. "I am not sure if I like or dislike this carefree attitude."

"No need to grumble, old man," Arameni grinned. "I have

brought in the cool water from the mountain spring nearby."

"It is all I can do these days. Nobody listens to me anymore," he sulked. "Though I suppose I should thank you for bringing cleanliness into my home."

"Father, darling, I think I will check in with the housekeepers and see where our barley drinks are," Hayadusta smiled warmly at the scene before her and sashayed out. There was a reason her husband had wanted to come along, outside of the celebration, and she would make sure the men were given ample opportunity to converse in peace.

Wondering about her husband's odd behavior during the past few days, especially considering their newlywed status—which, to her delight, was marked with an incredible amount of honey, Hayadusta decided to allow him to share his misgivings once he had all the information needed. While they had agreed they would rule together, matters of warfare were her husband's domain. If he had not opened up about his worries to date, it must have had something to do with either their circle of spies or the unrest to the south of their borders. She had noticed quite a few messages containing the same name: Kimbaru.



Arameni sobered the moment Hayadusta left the room.

"Sir, I need your advice."

Artash's lips became a grim line, gaze fixed on the man before him. There was only one reason Arameni would use such a tone, and it was clear the former monarch had hoped the days of peace would last for a few summers at the least.

"Is it Kimbaru?" Deep ocean met with lighter sky as the men stared at one another for a pregnant moment.

"Yes, how did you know?"

"Son, you do not live to my age without knowing a thing or two about a king's psychology. I also have my little birds to rely on for information. You do not know what to expect from the man; am I correct in assuming this?"

Glancing to the side, the younger king shifted his feet where he stood. Swallowing hard, he was frank with his new relation. Peace and defense might have been Arameni's stronger suits, but Kimbaru's armies were known to leave nothing in their wake, riding in on lightning steeds and destroying everything in their path. "What wisdom can you impart, Father?"

"Do not let him cross the border," came the brisk reply. "You simply cannot. The moment you do, they will infiltrate every sector of your government, blend in with the people. Moreover, when the time is right, they will destroy you. They have already reduced most of the sea-bordering states to a fraction of their former glory. They will lay waste to any land they conquer. If you love your fledgling kingdom, if you value your life and that of your wife, you will ensure you tighten your borders now. We do not know if Kimbaru's spies have infiltrated already. However, if they have, at least we will not let them out. Within the past few moon spans, you have created an incredible home for many. The villagers speak in reverence of their monarchs and rumor has it not a single man, woman or child will starve this winter due to a bountiful yield during the harvest." Pride inched into the man's voice, and it was impossible for Arameni not to notice the twinkle in the elder's eyes.

"Yes, our head of agriculture is doing an incredible job. My sworn warriors have learned much about caring for a state in peace. Arodi has personally ensured all available fields are tilled, the fruits of their labors harvested. Granaries have been created throughout the land, a large building for every three to five villages, with deep cellars to keep the hardier fruits and vegetables cool enough to be eaten during the winter months. I cannot afford to have Kimbaru on our doorstep. This information has not been leaked yet, but it is a matter of time before the people realize there is a genuine chance the barbarian commander will attack. While we are well-stocked, such an invasion would spell disaster for our people. I will be

diligent. I worry it might not be enough."

"It might not. However, there is no use in worrying so much. It would be best to employ our spies in this case. Send them to their camp." Sitting on his obsidian bench covered in furs, Artash considered their options.

"I have thought of that. I need a fresh face, in any case. Female perhaps? I hear Kimbaru has a taste for beautiful women; and red hair," the king mused.

"I have heard of a seer in his camp, one who probably warms his bed. Red hair is certainly his thing. However, she would sense a problem."

"Yes, I believe she would."

"Who is she, do you know?" Arameni was almost positive the answer would be in the affirmative.

"Someone from our lands, from what I have heard. A former priestess gifted with the magic of Haya."

"Arani?"

"Yes, unfortunately. Defected a long time back. I believe she might still have relations among the Arani and the Harrani. No one knows her age, but reports have mentioned a great beauty."

"That is strange. Can the priestesses conceal their age with their powers?" Arameni wondered aloud. It would certainly be an asset, and should the enemy have such a powerful source of magic, it was important he learned all the specifics.

"I believe you might have to ask those at your court, my son. My ladies here have little experience in such matters."

"Yes, I should consult with Hayadusta on this. She might be able to find an elder who understands the nuances at play here."

"Arameni, my daughter has a great many gifts. I suggest keeping her in your confidence."

Sighing, the king looked toward the mural painted on the walls.

He loved this red ink. It came from a particular insect well-known in the former Arani lands. Vortan garmir, they had called it. The depictions were basic, but lovely to behold.

"You are correct. I should not have kept my worries to myself."

"No, though it is understandable. Politics is no place for a well-bred woman. She is not like most, however. She is tough inside."

"Most women are strong. Unfortunately, childbirth, motherhood, husbands who do not appreciate them; all these things reduce their strength, sometimes even their resolve and self-confidence." It was not a rebuff, merely the stating of facts. He had wanted to protect his wife from the malice in men's hearts. The truth was that she probably had better insight into the situation. His lips lifted into a small smile as Arameni thought of his wife. She could have thrown him off the cliff if she so wished after her abduction. She even bantered with him about it. In the end, she was a wiser woman than any of them gave her credit for. His light chatter over the past days with her groomsman had revealed as such. Aris was her favorite, and she was his, he had surmised. With good reason, though he was unsure how to respond to that particular relationship.

He sighed, shifting in his seat. "Father, I think I will continue this conversation with my wife present."

Nodding, the former monarch smiled, muttering inaudibly. "Yes, my daughter has chosen a good man as her king."

Part III

Chapter Eleven

Kimbaru



The lands to the south were scorching hot, in direct contrast to those north of Hayara, where the snow and cold defined the region. It was in the south where armies found themselves facing off against nature more often than their human adversaries; a nature that decimated their ranks more surely than would a horde of elephants. The water basins had been drying slowly but surely over the past decades, and the army's victories against the shore nations only offered small respite.

Sharp grey eyes flitted to the camp below as the commander watched his people, deep in thought. Across the desert plains, as far as his eyes could see, his men trained night and day.

"The medics are overworked these days," he stated, turning to enter his temporary home. It was a pleasant enough space, shaded and protected against the blazing orb overhead. Small but comfortable.

"My lord! Lady Ramona wishes to see you. Shall I let her in?"

"Yes, of course, Kaydeh. Send her in."

Brushing the dust off his armor, Kimbaru awaited the woman who brought him daily news of life or death. He dreaded her visits and eagerly awaited them each evening. They were vital, of course, for a blind commander leads an army to its demise. However, Ramona was from the lands of the north. She was from harsh winters, where the very environment hardened even the softest of hearts. He loved the enchantress with a passion and despised her with the same breath. Her gods were foreign, her unbound hair wild, her tongue was sharp, and she was the bravest woman to have walked this earth. She could command armies if she so wished; but instead, she healed, she listened, she watched. Then she came to him.

"If she were not so valuable, she would be dead..." He muttered to himself before sensing her aura. It was a good few moments before Ramona pushed aside the flap of his tent and entered with jingling arms and legs. He never understood whence her love for golden circlets came. Her attire left little to the imagination, the red fabric both light and binding on a figure he enjoyed a little too much for his taste.

Once again, he wondered whether she was not from so far north, after all. The Arani were famed for their love of gold and used advanced ships to bring their goods down all the way to Msr. The jewels and riches of both Harrania and Arania were a coveted commodity throughout the region, with merchants from all over flocking to the larger settlements. As a nomad, Kimbaru found their way of life a foreign concept. Who could stay in one place for so long? The idea baffled him to no end, and that bafflement, in turn, led to an intense desire to destroy it. One could say there was no rational reasoning to this thought process. Yet, here was one of the

fiercest commanders in the world, with an army to make most any clan or settlement shake in fear, and he could not understand how the wealthiest in the region refused to buckle, to shiver, to even spare Kimbaru a thought.

Perhaps the time had come to teach them a lesson.

"If I were dead, I could not bring good news," tinkled Ramona.

His eyes slightly rounded at the words. "Good news? The last time such things were heard from your lips, I was but a child, I believe."

"Oh, wipe that smirk off your face, you haughty idiot," huffed the beautiful woman in red and gold. "If I had known you as a child, I might have smothered you in your sleep long ago to spare the world your terror."

She was quite appealing, to be sure, something not lost on Kimbaru. Not a supple child, but a woman who knew her worth. All wanted her, yet none dared approach her. There were rumors stating she had slit the throat of the last man who dared presume too much. He wasn't sure he wanted to know what the poor sapling had presumed. She was necessary, though, and all she asked for was respect. She did not have to ask; her scowl commanded it. Prickly she was, but kind, nonetheless, and with the smile of an angel. Who she was, precisely, was one of those mysteries Kimbaru ached to uncover. Neither age nor background was transparent. He hated mysteries.

"You realize I have run men through for lesser insults?" An elegant brow raised in amusement.

"And you realize I do not have to tell you anything at all, my dearest commander?" She retorted with a sickly sweet smile that twisted at his guts. A frightening woman, he grimaced.

Crossing his legs as he sank onto the futons, he beckoned her to join. "I am in no mood for our bickering today, Ramona. Come, sit, let me pour you some wine and hear something pleasant for once from those succulent berry lips."

Eyes widening at his unexpected tone, she fluttered her lashes. "Very well," the healer said, joining him.

"You're admiring me?" He smirked at her appraising look, enjoying the feel of her gaze on hard muscles.

"With lighter skin than most from your lands, you stand out. A paragon of both strength and intelligence, I dare say. So yes, I do admire you, to an extent."

While not handsome by local standards, he knew his charm and mannerisms attracted many a woman. Well into his third decade of life, Kimbaru was a man brimming with passion, impatience, and a thirst for blood few possessed.

His lips quirked at the slight apprehension in her gaze, his tone mocking. "Do I frighten you, my lady?"

"Your eccentric nature is nothing to be frightened of."

"Oh, I'm positive I at least frightened you initially, though you would never admit it. Over time, however, it appears mutual respect has developed."

He needed her, found her mysterious nature a puzzle he probably would never solve; yet quitting was not part of his plans, even in a matter as small as this. The commander enjoyed how she let loose around him, reveling in the friendly banter that would often surge into such heated arguments that nearly consumed them both in their intensity before they once again found common ground and acquiesced. It was a battle of wits, of tongues, of pride; and he was never sure who came out the winner. He knew it was well worth it in the end, and she appeared to feel the same. The world was harsh out there, the days bloody and grueling; in here, however, on soft futons and sipping the finest wines snatched from the latest raids, the amiable company was a balm to his scars, as well as hers.

Snorting, she lifted the delicate gold chalice studded with jewels. "A new acquisition?"

"Always something new for you. Now, tell me, am I destined for

greatness?" He mocked, but a part of him wanted her confirmation. Needed it. What he did not expect was her sudden stillness, the drop in her voice.

"The fires will engulf the waters, the seas will turn to salt, the world will crumble around you, and you will rule it all." Eyes glazed the moment the prophecy left her lips. There was fear in her expression, and Kimbaru found himself entranced. He had seen in his dreams that he would rule as king. Where he commanded only a rogue army now, all would fear and respect him. "But there is a phoenix, always a phoenix."

Closing her eyes, he watched the vision swallow her whole as she continued, "The mountains will bow to your will until the day the phoenix will rise, until the day the gentle stream mixes with the sun and a flower blooms, the most beautiful of all."

Startled by her words, her hitched breath at the mention of a phoenix, Kimbaru bellowed. "What do you mean, you crazy witch?"

With feigned calm, she whispered. "I do not know."

The rage in his eyes would kill a weaker man, but she was neither man nor weak. "I said, I do not know, so stop growling at me, you horrid man! You asked for a reading, and the heavens saw it fit to tell you this. Decipher it yourself! I am only the messenger!" Red with anger, she gathered her skirts and with her tinkling bangles like ringing bells in his ears, she marched off.

Suddenly weary, Kimbaru fell back and stared at the tan ceiling of his tent. How can a flower put an end to my reign? What phoenix does she speak of? They are merely legends! He scoffed at the thought, though the turmoil did not end. Deciding to take a ride instead, he washed his face with a few drops of saved rainwater and walked out. Perhaps a wench was needed to sate his thirst for blood and pleasure. She wouldn't be missed either way.



Ramona entered a trance of sorts as she leaned against the solid wood of the broken tree, struck by lightning and left behind as a remnant of a god's anger. In her mind, she saw the beast before it moved towards her. Male or female, she did not know, but in the world it showed her, such details mattered not. It was magnificent, with gleaming fur and a snarl that instilled fear in all who saw it. A bull that demanded the respect of all, both mortal and god. It was a creature not of this world. It had appeared to her many a time. Not a physical manifestation per se, but one which brought with it a sense of foreboding, a staggering desire to kill. There was evil in the creature, and she knew it was as much a part of the circle of life as Haya's goodness and Ar's light. She knew the consequences of seeing it, of touching the oozing body before her. She knew what would transpire due to her being here, her mind beyond the realm of men. Malice fed her spirit, however; pain healed her heart. The bull before her calmed her, its sickly white appearance an unexpected balm. It offered her its wisdom, its strength, and the moment she touched it, she knew she was lost to the good in this world. The moment she gave herself to it, there was no going back. It was dreadfully beautiful and, she knew, under her command.

She was indeed a fallen priestess.

A creature of darkness herself, Ramona wandered the world. Ageless, unending. She knew her place was in this world and that her death, that final and glorious sleep, would come with the rising of the phoenix. She might not understand the metaphor, but realized the truth of it. There was no question. She would die. However, before she did, Kimbaru would rise as king. He would be magnificent, just like the creature before her. He would be destruction and madness, just like her bull. Perhaps he would be her undoing. It mattered not. She was neither kind nor good. She was, however, cursed with the ability to heal, and that is what she did. With each life she saved, each soul she eased, each body she

fixed, a part of her died.

She prayed for death and wondered to whom she prayed. For this, she would bring about the end of a nation, raise a tyrant to near the status of a god, and finally rest in peace. That she indeed loved said tyrant made no difference to her plans. It was merely a delectable reprise. Her nights in his arms, days of stolen kisses and insatiable passion, moments of pure bliss to erase the loneliness of her past—everything was a gift she was loath to give up.

He was not tender, he was not kind, and he did not care for her emotions or her person. At least, not that she had surmised. However, their souls had mated, and so they endured each other's company enraptured. It was a conundrum, really, but they both accepted the spiteful words in stride, longing for the bickering that was inevitable when they were apart. Would he miss her when she was gone?

"What are you doing here?" An irritated voice startled her thoughts.

"My lord!" she responded in surprise with a slight bow, for she was still locked in her mind and her thoughts a thousand leagues away.

Frowning, Kimbaru stepped forward. His gaze did not waver from her form. "This is unexpected. Curiosity tames my desire to ravage you." His eyes twinkled, but the words had no bite.

She let out a laugh. "Don't fool yourself into thinking I have any desire to be ravaged and left, as is your custom, either. What on earth are you doing in this region of the desert, anyhow?"

"Looking for something to hunt, of course."

"In the middle of the night?"

"Does it matter what time it is? It is the desert. Perhaps I can find something more interesting without the glaring rays of the sun to ruin my pleasure," he grunted, never a man to back down from a challenge.

Emboldened, Ramona tossed eerily bright red hair over her shoulders and crossed her arms even as she relaxed her stance. "And have you found your prey, my lord?" The purr in her voice was unmistakable, and she knew it stirred Kimbaru's passions.

"You are a whore; you know that?"

"Yes, yours," she winked.

Growling, he took two strides and pulled her hair back, exposing her neck to his bites. "If I were a beast, you'd be dead at this moment."

"You are a beast, and you would not kill me," she smiled demurely, pulling him in for a kiss that smoldered and burned, acidic but addictive as it shook them both to the core.

"Insolent wretch," he murmured between kisses and bit down on her lips. She undulated her hips and beckoned him closer, promising him a night he would enjoy over and over again. After all, she might not be the prey he was looking for, but she felt she was a good enough substitute. She had every intention of taking her own pleasure from their encounter as well.



In the morning, with Ramona still sprawled across his furs, Kimbaru looked closer at his sleeping seer. There was a darkness in her which threatened to swallow him alive. When she had arrived three summers back, she'd seemed desolate and empty. Starving, eyes glassy with fever, constantly murmuring something under her breath. It almost appeared as if she was calling out to a phoenix. His rational mind concluded she was a madwoman, but over time, she had proven her worth by providing essential knowledge of exactly what the outcome of each battle would be. Perhaps the legendary creatures would indeed make an appearance in this world? He could not tell the truth of it and had decided not to ask until she mentioned it during her vision the day before. It frightened him.

A phoenix heralds the rebirth of something great. If it would mean the end of his dynasty, perhaps one stronger than he, a man with the strength of the gods themselves, would become the death of him. It was impossible to tell because she herself seemed confused about this prophecy. Her eyes had lit up strangely at the thought of such a phoenix rising, though. He wondered if she knew more than she led him to believe. At times like these, he wished he had the power to read minds. It would certainly guarantee a long reign, with fewer surprises. The thought of settling in one place made him queasy, but her words inspired a dream he'd dared not envision before her words painted an image all too enticing.

Sighing, he played with a handful of her silky red curls. It grew rather quickly, he mused. He had cut it himself a short while ago—when the summer season had come in with a vengeance—cut short to just below her ears to reduce the weight and the itch that always seemed to develop with the unbearably dry heat. It was an experiment he had tried out, for it appeared it never grew longer than around her rump. Strange enough, it was back to its original length less than two moon spans later, before stopping once more. He did not know what to make of it. Or of anything else about her. He found her quite mystical, overall. Whether this was one of her otherworldly traits, he could not know. Bringing the strands closer, he took a sniff. She smelled of fresh springs and murky waters, somehow intertwined. The woman was an enigma.

"Get up if you want breakfast," he ordered, standing up himself and pulling on his clothing. "Help me with my armor before I go out."

Murmuring in her sleep, Ramona simply pushed aside the furs covering her, revealing a mature but supple hourglass body, slightly scarred all around. He traced each bit of white raised flesh with his gaze, itching to touch instead.

"Dress yourself and eat alone. Let me sleep, Kimbaru."

"No more 'my lord' I see. Very well, don't blame me if you go hungry all day," he grunted before calling in the boy he considered a son.

"Kaydeh, get in here and help me with my armor!"

Scurrying in without second thought, Kaydeh entered the tent only to be greeted with the image of a delectably naked body across from where his lord sat. Flushing a deep red, he quickly averted his eyes and hurried over to his commander.

"My lord!"

Laughing, Kimbaru did not mask his amusement. "Yes, she's naked. Yes, you can look. It is her fault for moving so much in her sleep. Plus, she should have done this herself," he clicked his tongue, and his eyes twinkled with mischief. "You can play, if you'd like."

"No!" Kaydeh stuttered, looking about ready to burst. This sight erupted a second bout of laughter from the sadistic lord. "Please, sire, let me finish and leave as soon as I can. I prefer not to disturb your privacy." Looking down as he spoke, Kaydeh hurried with his duties. Kimbaru smiled, thoroughly pleased as he realized the boy was doing his best to block out the image of the red beauty. She was, after all, part of the fantasy of every man scurrying about in the vicinity.

"No?"

"You know I would never covet my master's lover."

Patting his head tenderly, Kimbaru gave the boy a genuine smile. "Yes, Kaydeh, I know where your loyalties lie." The boy had protected him countless times, throwing himself before danger without a moment's hesitation. He had been invaluable in helping dress wounds and keeping the commander company in his worst moods. Through him, Kimbaru understood the more innocent facets of humanity. Surprisingly, he treasured the child. No, not a child; nearly a man. Perhaps old enough for Kaydeh to learn how to lie with women. Time enough for that, he mused. Kimbaru would see to his military training first. Kaydeh was great with a sword already, but his rashness and tendency to step right into the heart of danger were worrying. Archery would probably be the better option.

"Remind me. How much experience do you have with a bow and arrow?"

Cocking his head to the side, Kaydeh answered while lifting a breast plate. "Very little, to tell you the truth, my lord. I have had little chance to learn well. But I have always wanted to master the skill. It comes in very handy as secondary protection. I don't think it is as important as knowing how to wield a sword or spear, but it is a smart way to defeat your opponent as he charges from a distance. A great way to protect you."

Nodding, Kimbaru began considering his options. He would start to train the boy personally that afternoon.

"Sire, I'm done here. I'll be just outside if you need me."

"Thank you, Kaydeh, but you need not worry so much. You can stay in here if you prefer something more... interesting than keeping the sand out of your eyes."

His mischievous grin caused the boy to stutter. "No, thank you, my lord. I would rather leave you two alone."

With that, and his duties completed to his lord's satisfaction, Kaydeh quickly ducked out. Hearing a chuckle from the bed, Kimbaru cast the woman a sidelong glance.

"He is quite bashful, is he not? I wonder..."

"Hands off the child, woman."

"Ah, but you did say he could play with me," she winked at his scowling face.

"Do what you wish, but leave the child alone. He is too pure for your wiles and too gentle for your darkness." Pulling her hair back, he brought his face close to hers. "Are we understood?"

Biting at his nose playfully, she disentangled herself and immediately tackled him, settling herself astraddle. "You are correct there, my dear. On that point, you are the only one who can match the darkness in me." She bit his earlobe playfully before nibbling down his skin. "I wonder what type of commotion I would

cause if I walked out this way," she grinned before raising a brow at her equally sadistic lover. "You would not mind, would you?"

Rolling her over, he moved back against his heels. Looking down at her body, he could easily count the ribs. She was no longer the starving waif he had found near his encampment, but she had gained little. It worried him sometimes, as he preferred something soft to sink himself into. She had just enough to stir his lust, however, and he would not be fussy about it.

"My sweet little dog, I would not protect you at all," he replied before grabbing her clothing and throwing it outside with three quick strides to the flap. "Go fetch."

Blowing him a kiss, she pretended to sashay out as she hurried to her carelessly discarded robes before anyone would notice. If they did, none said a word. The battle of wits and power between the two were infamous at this point, and getting involved would only burn, no matter what one's intentions were.



As the days wore on, Kimbaru's strange restlessness became increasingly apparent. A sharp weapon in his hand meant nothing if he could not use it against an enemy. While some of his newer charges certainly required the vigorous training he put them through, the men he had gathered numbered over sixty thousand. Together with their wives, children, and the elderly, his people numbered over one hundred and fifty thousand. Some followed him out of fear; some had nowhere else to go. Many had been babes brought up to the sounds of clanging steel. For many a summer, Kimbaru had strengthened his army, perfected every stance, every parry, every thrust. He had taught his people philosophy around campfires and warfare in the unforgiving sands, sharing the knowledge which he devoured—in the rare times he found himself able to rest—from written scrolls mainly collected from Msr. He taught himself languages of nearby clans and even deigned to pick

up the tongue twisting words of the Hayarans. Merciless he may have been, but he had the makings of a good ruler. Unfortunately, some traits made him entirely unsuitable for anything but leading an army. He knew Ramona could see these flaws with ease, but most were blind to the worst of his attributes.

"Sire! The quarantined have conquered their illness!"

Turning to the youth who ran to him, Kimbaru allowed a small smile to form as he awaited the details. This was good news indeed.

"All of them? How many dead?"

"Unfortunately, we lost seventeen soldiers to this bout, my lord. From the medical tallies, we are at sixty-three losses since the beginning of the summer, and we are newly entering autumn."

"That is to be expected. What do you think we would have been looking at without Ramona?" Kimbaru asked with trepidation.

"Over a hundred, if not nearly two hundred, my lord."

The commander's eyes shut tight, trying to ward off the sudden pain at his temple. He knew she was important for many reasons but had not expected her to cut down the losses they took this summer by threefold.

"I'm thrilled she came to us," murmured Kaydeh.

"Do you like her, boy?"

"I do, my lord. I like her kindness, the mystery around her. I am in awe of her boldness, but mostly, I am eager to learn as much as I can from her." Pride laced his words as he puffed out his chest.

"Then learn as much as you can, for I have a feeling she shall not be with us forever, Kaydeh."

"My lord?"

Standing atop that hill, overlooking the lands he had turned into his tribal settlement, Kimbaru inhaled the scent of blood, of metals, and the myrrh used to ward off the illness. "We have not had a good battle in too many moon spans, and winter is fast approaching; I

would like to add to our stores. We may lack for nothing now, but we are not merchants. We are warriors. We fight until we die, and even then, we fight some more."

Kaydeh's eyes widened. "You speak as if you know our next conquest, sire."

"Oh, I do... And you will help me with it."

"Me? I am your humble servant. I would sacrifice myself if you wished it. I'm not strong, but whatever you wish, I will do!"

"Hush, child. I know your strength is in your mind. I also know of your skills in stealth."

Before the boy could protest, Kimbaru continued, "I know what you can and cannot do. You forget, I was born as astute as the eagle and as sly as the fox." He remembered words from his childhood. Words Ramona had once unwittingly repeated.

"Sire..."

"Now, you know of the Arani and the Harrani. Did you know that the two kingdoms have merged? Did you know the united lands of Hayara are the richest in the entire region? Even the lands of Ashor cannot compete. The fact that they, in turn, have annexed the five neighboring clans, with Urar, Nayi, Aza, Mitti, and Huri now a part of Greater Hayara, only makes my blood boil. I wanted to conquer them one after the other, to watch them scramble in frustration, in fear, and finally bow low and kiss the very feet that crushed them..." He made a fist and growled. "I grow bored with spineless lords, though, of kings who would rather give up the crown than die to protect their people. I grow weary of simple rape and pillage, and despite my preferences, I know my people will need a home to settle in finally. We cannot keep making and breaking camp every summer or two."

"You want the wealth of this new Hayara for us, then?" Kaydeh stared at the commander in wonder.

"Correct. I want the gold, the wheat, the fruit, and the dense forests to hunt in. I want out of this desert and into the bosom of a

motherland that treats her children right. We shall not go hungry; we shall not lack for sport. Our young will grow up in a world without the constant battle cries and the scent of blood that pervades our here and now."

"It sounds lovely..." the boy smiled with a faraway look on his face. Kimbaru knew Kaydeh wanted to settle in a single place, always envious of those they defeated for the stability they had known. He felt sad for the children and young men they picked up along the way, knowing they left a steady home for one that was ever-changing, ever fraught with danger. "I would love that," he stated to his lord, a slight flush to his face.

It was rare for Kimbaru to open up about his plans thus, but the commander knew he was fading as time sped by, though he would never admit it aloud. It had been many summers now that Kaydeh spent by his side and served him. The boy had practically been raised by his liege and found it comforting to be around the commanding presence beside him. Kimbaru returned the sentiment.

"We have everything we need here, Kaydeh, and have amassed riches that could soon compete with that of Hayara. Unfortunately, the days here are too warm, the grounds too dry. I desire lush greenery, streams at every turn, waterfalls to catapult from. I desire Hayara." With a fiery glint in his eyes, he stated his intentions. "Even if the gods oppose it, I will rule! Hayara shall be mine!"

Slightly frightened by the intensity of those words, Kaydeh took a step back.

"Do not fear me, boy. However, I ask one thing of you. Be my eyes and ears. Go north, figure out what is happening there. If there is internal strife, report it back. Bring me news about their king and his new queen. Find out about their strengths and their weaknesses. You will help me lead an army there, and we shall conquer the unconquerable. I will crush Arameni, and I will steal his bounty; I will be king. Perhaps I will even keep his queen as my royal slave, shackled and bound, at my mercy. The time has come for Kimbaru to finally receive all that which he deserves!"

Chapter Twelve

Ramona



Kaydeh stood before the woman he had revered for the past three summers. She had become a constant in his life. His ability to heal was in large part due to her patient training.

"Lady Ramona, you look as if there is much on your mind. Is there anything with which I can help?"

"Kaydeh, my dear child. I want to tell you something. You cannot reveal this to anyone, and especially not to Kimbaru."

Tensing, the young man who had been ready to take on the task of a spy in Hayara clenched his fists and narrowed his eyes.

"If you know something and you are not telling the commander, I will not forgive you!" With a hammering heart, he spewed out the threat, his voice surprisingly steady in his growing anger.

"Calm yourself, child. We all know things we do not tell others. It is the process of life. You will understand in due time..."

"No! I cannot allow you to keep secrets from the man who protects you! It is unfair to expect me to lie, as well."

Sighing, the woman allowed her eyes to change colors, taking on a very blue hue. "Look at me," she commanded.

"Your eyes changed!" Suddenly, the world tilted around him. She had magic. She could disguise herself. Dear Baal, what was she?

"Do I have your attention? Have you not wondered where my abilities to see future events, to prophesy, to heal so completely, come from?"

The world was undoubtedly reeling around him now. He felt faint. Why was she showing him this? The ground appeared to want to swallow him whole as he placed a hand on his horse to steady himself. She suddenly closed her eyes, and when they opened, it was the beautiful moss green hue once again, the one he knew so well. These were the eyes that had looked upon him so tenderly for three summers.

"My lady..."

"Kaydeh, listen to me. You are on a suicide mission. The gods do not allow me to tell Kimbaru about this. However, they have allowed me to warn you, to guide you."

"The gods speak to you?" Wondering aloud, he was trying hard to keep up with the events unraveling before him.

"Not in so many words anymore, unfortunately." A certain sadness thickened her voice. "Once, I was a favorite."

"Once? How old are you exactly, Lady Ramona?"

Laughing lightly, Ramona appeared almost youthful. The words were a whisper, not for his ears, but kept him enraptured in their lullaby as she looked to the sky, searching for her gods, perhaps. "It has been too many summers since my birth. The gods would not allow me to rest in peace. Bright summers of sunshine, I remember, before darkness split my soul and seeped into my being, bit by bit, eventually engulfing me in its searing embrace."

Louder, she spoke directly as she lowered her gaze to his, eyes aflame with a fire that could scorch those who dared defy her commands.

"I cannot divulge all my secrets, Kaydeh. However, know this; I

have lived longer than you can imagine. My skin was once very fair, my eyes a heavenly blue. Man changed me. So long as I served the goddess, I was safe. Then, foreign concepts were brought to our land. Women were no longer revered, and men strove to rule over us. Ar was once a servant to Haya. As the summers passed and traders, invaders, and men of terrible intentions came to us, Ar transformed in people's minds. Today, Haya and Ar might be equal in the heavens, but Ar rules over all. Haya is all but forgotten in most lands. Instead of revering the moon and the beautiful night sky, it is the sun they all long for. Only the Arani and Harrani were left, Kaydeh. Soon even that will be no more. My heart hurts at the thought..."

"You were a priestess," Kaydeh stated, voice just above a whisper. It was not a question. He could see it. He could feel it. A priestess of Haya should be filled with a bright light, he thought. Ramona carried heavy darkness, which could not belong to Haya. Could it?

"I know what you are thinking of, my child." To his utter surprise, she began to strip. Warmth crept up his neck and something stirred inside of him. She was beautiful, and then, suddenly, she was not. She had let the glamor drop.

"What are you?" He cried out in fear. The woman before him was wrinkled, skin sagging; with eyes of blue, hair a white golden sheen falling to the ground, stringy and sparse. She could have been beautiful once, but her milky white skin bared before him held an almost artistic collection of scars. Her nose appeared to have been broken at least once. Her arms sported the grooves from deep welts. Her breasts. Oh, Baal! Her breasts were misshapen, deformed. Her usually flat stomach now appeared to have borne a child or two, with a large slash across a sagging belly. Eyes bulging, Kaydeh could not avert them from the terrible sight before him.

"The real me," she answered hoarsely. "This is a reflection of who I am, Kaydeh."

"I want to cry. Scream at the injustice! What happened to you?"

Smiling lightly, she allowed the magic in her to conceal the sordid truth, smoothing wrinkles and scars, bronzing her skin and adding a youthful glow.

"Now, will you listen to what I have to say?"

"Please tell me, my lady, what did I just see?"

"Dearest Kaydeh, keep your gods close to your heart. Please do not blame them for the evil in this world. Man is evil. Over time, you become tainted by it. Once you fall into a depression, wallowing in self-loathing, anger and despair, there is no salvation for your soul."

"My soul?"

"Yes, darling. You are so young and so innocent. That is the reason Kimbaru protects you; the reason he trusts you. The malice of humankind has not yet tampered with your soul. A soul is an essence; it defines you as a person. It is not easy to put into words, but know it is there and once we pass, once our bodies become nothing but dust and bones, once that heart stops beating and your mind no longer functions, only then does your soul search for home. Whether the gods allow your soul back into their realm is up to you. What you do in your life affects how your soul will be received once it all ends."

"I do not know how to respond, my lady."

"No, I don't suppose you do," she mused.

"Lady Ramona?"

"Yes, my child?"

"You stopped me for a reason. What was so important that you had to reveal your true self?"

"This was only a drop in the ocean, Kaydeh." She smiled, but Kaydeh could not calm his fidgeting fingers, only realizing he gnawed at his lips once he tasted blood.

"My lady?"

"Kaydeh, one of my abilities is to know when something might go horribly wrong. In this case, the gods have allowed me to see your path, at least one of the many possibilities they allow, and it is not a peaceful one. It is bloody and fraught with pain. If you notice anything amiss and your life is in danger, I implore you to seek out a relative of mine. Her name is Hayisi. She is a priestess to Haya."

With her words, the fidgeting finally stopped, and now Kaydeh stood stiff, trying to make sense of the information. The golden white hair was not nearly as revealing as those bright blue eyes. Priestesses inherited their powers; he knew that. If a relative were a priestess to Haya, then Ramona would once have been of similar standing as well. Looking at her now, Kaydeh gasped, soaking in all that he had seen.

"You're Arani or Harrani!"

"Once again, a secret you shall take to your grave, my son."

Quivering with fear, he did not know what to think. "Why are you revealing this to me?"

"Because it is necessary. Kaydeh, I do not have long to live. In that time, Kimbaru will rise to power. Hayara will fall. Hayara's fall will signal my death. I have come to terms with this and even relish in the thought."

"You will destroy your motherland..." His voice was barely a whisper on the wind, eyes filling with tears. It brought the destruction of Fonecia to mind.

"Kaydeh, listen to me. I will not allow your death. You are the only thing keeping the commander's darkness at bay. You are the innocence he hangs to like a falling man hangs to the edge of the cliff. If you are lost to him, he will spiral out of control. He intends to rule Hayara now, not destroy it. Your death will truly be the end of Hayara."

"You will cause the death of your blood, your people..."

"Kaydeh! I need you to understand. Please. If you feel even a remote chance of danger to your life, find Hayisi!"

"You are a traitor..."

"Please, my sweet boy. I beg of you to snap out of it." She cried now. It was clear she had wanted to protect him. "Oh Haya, what have I done?"

Suddenly moving with unexpected speed, Kaydeh grabbed his horse's reins and swung onto the saddle. Ramona waited, for it was he who had to make a choice, ultimately.

"Dear Baal, what should I do?" He whispered to himself, fingers clenched, heartbeat racing. Beads of sweat had formed on his brow, and the sun was not the culprit here. He had to meet with Kimbaru. What should he do? His gods did not answer him. His gods never did.

"Does Haya ever speak to you? Does she answer your prayers?" he asked quietly.

Looking wistfully at where the sky met the earth on the horizon, as if suddenly desiring the night, away from the blazing heat above, she answered with a broken voice revealing a broken heart. "Once, she was very clear. These days, she only shows me possible paths. Even these are shrouded in mystery most of the time. Her presence is no longer felt and when she gives me something, anything, to cling to... it no longer soothes my soul."

His torment was consuming him, and he wanted to fall into her embrace as he had done many a time when his heart had hurt for the dead, the dying, and the wounded. She had become so dear to him, and he was sure the feelings were mutual. However, they both stood their ground, and both looked to the other with emotions too raw to act upon. Nothing would have been right in that moment. Kaydeh knew this was his battle to fight. It did not make the realization that they might not be as close to their gods as he had always assumed any easier to bear.

"She has forsaken you, too."

"The gods do not forsake, my sweet boy. We simply forget how to communicate with them. They are forever trying to protect us,

show us their love. We are the ones who forsake them." Tears shone in her eyes before she closed them to shield her heart. "For the first time in over fifty summers, I want to fall to my knees and beg for Haya's forgiveness."

"Is this what it means to repent?"

"I do not know, my sweet."

"My gods do not answer me," he grudgingly admitted. His parents had taught him about their gods long ago. It was before Kimbaru's invasions had brought the boy to the commander's side. While Kaydeh never revealed his true religion to the world, he kept his mother's lessons in his heart. "My gods do not know me."

Laughing lightly at his naiveté, moss green eyes met with a green-flecked honey brown in turmoil. "They love and protect you. This I can see clearly. It is why, amidst all this rage, blood, and pain, you have retained that innocence. It's why you are the man you are. They do not allow the madness of this world to mar your inner beauty. Never forget that though we cannot see them, the gods are forever by our side."

"But they do not even answer their priestesses."

"Kaydeh, my life had been nothing but despair until I met Kimbaru. Even now, I have to wonder at how much joy I see here. Despite everything I experienced, my gods ensured I finally had a soul to connect with. My final summers have been calm and steady, for the most part. Haya gave me the peace I craved and the ability to heal, despite the darkness eating at my soul. Despite the hatred and revenge which feeds me. The things I have done, the things I have seen. Kaydeh, may you never experience the depravity of warfare in the manner that I have."

"The people of Hayara will."

"Yes, they will. I cannot protect them all. Things must occur this way, however, for subsequent events to unfold."

"Why? Lady Ramona, why are you helping Kimbaru with this? His madness terrifies me already. I do not know what type of king

he will be, but he will never be happy with peace. It might amplify his cruelty, his lust for destruction, his insatiable desire to kill." Kaydeh's head hurt as he felt it spin, almost as though sharp daggers were piercing through his skull. His heart wanted to believe in the best, but he had never seen life without war, without bloodshed, without the stories of pillage, rape, and death. He had been tending to the wounded with the woman before him; helping them cope with illness, cold nights, drought, and the excruciatingly slow death of hunger. Kimbaru had kept him alive. Kimbaru had never allowed the worries of the world to touch him. As a boy, he had seen it, nonetheless. How he had held onto his childlike innocence, even he did not understand. Perhaps it was because he had not yet killed a man. He knew how, technically, but had not been given a chance to practice those skills. Instead, Kimbaru ensured he saved lives.

Clenching a fist against his heart, Kaydeh made his decision.

"Tell me about this priestess, my lady." There was a coldness in his voice and his heart, making him wonder if this time he had been pushed too far.

"Kaydeh, you will meet many a man who would run you through with an iron blade, who would pierce you with an obsidian dagger. Remember, outside of Msr, this is where most of the region purchases elite and specialized weaponry of the highest quality. While the Harrani were known for peace, the Arani lusted for war. They may have mixed now, but the essence of each differs. It would be best if you were wary. Let nothing slip. You may speak of your gods, of your lands, of the pillage and the pain of escaping your home. Keep the details to a minimum, however."

"Yes, I have been considering what my story would be. I can use as many facts from reality as possible, without mentioning Kimbaru and my life growing up here. Instead, I would have to say that a local chieftain in a nomadic tribe raised me, loved me, and now that there is so much uncertainty, so many battles, so much disease and bloodshed in the region, he has sent me to the safety of the northern lands. I just happened to come across Hayara."

"Yes, that is believable. They will take you in, without doubt. However, the chieftain should have a name. One of our enemies to the south is Vasha. State that Lord Vasha kept you as his ward."

"Will they try to confirm the information?"

"Unless Vasha's people have been trying to broker an alliance with the Hayaran king, I doubt it. You should be safe as long as you blend in. Should you see trouble brewing, make your way to the Arabos Mountains. Hayisi will offer you shelter if you speak my name."

"If you are Arani, your name was not Ramona. Am I correct?"

"Astute, as always. No, my name was Hayasa."

"Hayasa. Kimbaru must not know of this?"

"No, he cannot know of this. For him, I am from the far north, beyond Hayaran borders."

"Why Ramona? It is an odd name."

"Correct. It is a name I learned about when I found myself lodging with a kind merchant from lands beyond the seas. Sapanya, he had called it. He often said I was wise beyond my years and harbored an ability to protect that which I loved most. When I spoke of my intentions to take on a new name, he smiled and said, Ramona. I was quite young, barely past twenty-five summers. It appealed to me greatly. 'Why Ramona?' I asked, and he responded by kissing my forehead. 'It means wise protector,' he replied then. I fell in love with the name as well as the man." Her features had softened with her story.

"What happened to him?"

"It was not long after I met and began staying with him when debtors appeared and decided his life was of no concern to the world. Stealing all that he had, they thought they had left me for dead, as well. They stabbed him and set our home on fire. I do not know how I escaped. The fire inspired me from then on. I could no longer appear as I was, burned, beaten, scarred. Borrowing from

my goddess-given powers, I concealed my body, creating a new look for myself. I was now a stranger in my own lands. It was enough for a while, but my life was not meant for love and peace. I was born to suffer. Moreover, with each shock, each battle for my life, I hardened my heart and lost a part of my humanity. My divinity perished at that point. I forgot how to love, and the closest I have come to such consuming emotions is the deadly passion I share with Kimbaru. That is the truth, Kaydeh; it is as deadly as a hailstorm in a drought. We would kill one another if we did not find the other more useful alive."

"How terrible!"

"It is, but we cannot change who we are any more than we can allow the world to change us. As such, I offer you protection. While I cannot personally watch over you, those once dear to me certainly will."

Inclining his head at her sincerity, Kaydeh spoke reverently, "Thank you, my dearest Lady Ramona. I will follow your instructions should the need arise. I must go to see Kimbaru now. You have my gratitude, forever."

Kimbaru might have been a father figure, but Ramona was a mother to him. What he had lost in childhood he had gained in these two individuals. No matter how dark the two may have appeared to the world, they had always treated him with love and respect. He would honor them to his dying days.

"Kaydeh, promise me." She needed to hear his words.

"I promise." He would keep the promise. He just wasn't sure which.

"Promise you will not say a word."

Smiling grimly, he closed his eyes in affirmation.



Ramona would have to trust in her young protégé now.

As the boy she loved so dearly rode away, she allowed her glamor to drop once more. Naked as the day she was born, she walked toward the stream flowing nearby and looked at her reflection. There was a weeping willow tree standing beside her, its back bent, branches swaying in the wind. The willow appeared to be dipping its leaves into the gurgling waters, enjoying the fresh scent emanating from it. Ramona envied the tree. She envied the world, it seemed. They were all so peaceful, yet her body reflected her soul. The scars seeped deeper than one could imagine.

"Haya, do you see me now? Can you still love your daughter?"

The wind whispered, the birds sang their song, but the goddess remained silent. Ever so silent.



Kimbaru was waiting for Kaydeh near the hidden salt pond he had often brought the boy to over the warmest periods of the summers. It was an exciting find for the two when they had been out hunting for birds to bring back to camp, Kaydeh barely into his twelfth summer at the time. They had stumbled upon it when a flock suddenly dove toward a slightly greener patch among the rocky hills. There were two bodies of water. The smaller pond was extremely salty, making the youthful Kaydeh laugh hysterically when he found it impossible to keep his backside under the water. The larger pond, or small lake, depending on how you looked at it, was also saline. Like a miniature ocean, you could float with ease, but you could also dive with little effort. There were no fish here, however, which often had them wondering what the flock had been after. The memory of the boy's bright and happy eyes brought a smile to his face.

Dust rose on the horizon as the sound of pounding hooves came closer. Kimbaru favored the boy. The child was the closest he had ever come to siring progeny. Perhaps that was all the gods would

allow him. Rape and murder had been his sport to date, in that order. He did not like leaving the women he hunted alive. The only woman he had allowed to live was Ramona. Did he love Ramona? If he became king, could he make her queen?

Lost in thought, he was startled when Kaydeh slid off his horse and approached.

"My lord! I am ready for your orders."

Fatherly pride swelled in the commander's heart. The child had grown into a handsome young man. The thought of seeing him off felt like a punch in the gut. He could not let him go. How could he? The boy was all that was precious to him in this world. Before the emotions could choke him, however, he pulled himself together. Kaydeh would leave today, and he would pave Kimbaru's path into Hayara. No matter how much he worried for the boy, it was a necessary step. There was no one he could trust more.

"You're late, Kaydeh."

"I'm sorry," he looked down, abashed.

"Did anything happen?"

"Lady Ramona just wished me well, my lord."

"Ramona? What did she say?"

Raising his eyes, Kaydeh appeared to be debating something.

"She merely hoped I would stay safe and said so."

"She has always struck me as strange. She is not what she seems to be, is she?"

Kimbaru wondered at the sudden shuttered look.

"She was motherly, sir. I respect that."

Narrowing his eyes, Kimbaru thought he heard a catch to the voice. Kaydeh was young and had never lied to him to date. Not that he was aware of. It was clear he knew something he was not sharing. Perhaps Kimbaru should approach Ramona about it later. It might not be anything special, and causing the boy distress right

now would do no good.

"Kaydeh, you are not to place yourself in any unnecessary danger. It will be hard to infiltrate the enemy state as it is. I want you to blend in, to become one with the shadows. None shall know you are there. If they do, pretend you have been sent north for your protection."

"Of course, Commander."

"I'm adamant about this, Kaydeh. You are like a son to me. I will not lose you to those wretches."

Kimbaru did his best to mask the slight quiver in his voice. He knew the boy saw him as a father figure as well; perhaps he saw Ramona as a mother.

"I promise I will be careful, my lord. I will come back to you. I will always come home." There was so much conviction in his voice; Kimbaru had no choice but to nod. He would not allow foreign gods to destroy that which he held dear.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes!"

"Are you excited?" Kimbaru smiled at the boy's enthusiastic reaction.

"Extremely. I am worried, as well. What if I do not find the information you need? What if I am unable to get it to you in time, even if I gather enough?"

"Use the birds, Kaydeh," he reminded his surrogate son.

Now grinning with ease, Kimbaru decided the duo could play one last time. Having already shed his armor for a swim earlier on, he grabbed Kaydeh by the forearm and pushed him into the larger of the two ponds.

"My lord!"

Gurgling back to the top of the salty water, Kaydeh glared. "This skin will take forever to dry!"

"Then strip, boy! I won't be sending you to Hayara until that blazing hot ball in the sky dries up the clothing you had on. I'm sure you have a change to wear into Hayara in your pack?"

"Of course," Kaydeh replied, removing the dripping leather and linen from his body. Kimbaru noticed the radiant smile and knew what the boy was thinking; his heart was delighted that he would be missed. It was enough to bring a grin to his face.

This was where they had often come to unwind, where they laughed and played like young children. Kaydeh appeared glad Kimbaru had asked him to meet here. No one knew what the future would bring. If they had to say goodbye, he could not think of a better alternative to this.

Time meant little when you were with those you loved.

"Kaydeh," Kimbaru said, with eyes closed and body warmed by the overhead sun, not long after their salt lake fun. Rippling muscles were matted with dark hair, a thick line down the center of his chest. He often wondered what the gods saw when they looked down at his naked body thus sprawled on the flat boulder beside the lake. Sighing, he turned to his young ward. "Come back to me."

Smiling, Kaydeh looked to the skies instead. Joining him, Kimbaru watched the wisps of cloud overhead and imprinted the peaceful moment in his heart. Such things were rare in his life.

"I will try. I would never willingly leave your side, my lord." Eyes shut against the sun's glare, it looked as though the boy had fallen asleep as he spoke those heartfelt words.

"Do you care for me so much, Son?"

"You know I would die a thousand deaths before I allowed anyone to bring you harm, my lord!" Snapping his eyes open at those words, Kaydeh responded vehemently. "You are the closest I have had to a family after the wars. You will always have my loyalty!"

Chuckling to himself, the commander responded, "I am quite lucky to have you, Kaydeh. I expect you to stay on as commander-

in-training, an adviser by my side, once I take the obsidian throne."

"Thank you, my lord! Thank you so much!" Pushing up from his position on the rock, he moved and bent over to hug Kimbaru with fierce intensity. Kimbaru would have been quite intrigued if he had heard the boy's thoughts then. Yes, he would come back, Kaydeh screamed in his mind. He would stay by this man's side. No matter the situation or the danger presented, he would never flee. He had no intention of finding sanctuary. Forgive me, Lady Ramona, for I will see this through.

Standing up, the men headed over to their discarded clothing. Kimbaru looked upon the child grown into a man before his eyes. A slender body that had muscled well over the past moon spans; small curls of hair were speckled here and there, mostly on his legs, barely on his arms and torso. He supposed the boy was quite handsome, and, with an angular face, sharp eyes, and a slightly hooked nose, it was almost apparent he was of noble breed. The boy did not remember his family, but Kimbaru did.

"Someday, my boy, you will be a coveted prize for many a father to give his daughter to."

Startled by the notion, Kaydeh turned his head. "My lord?"

"Do you not wish to marry?"

"Of course, but not anytime soon. There is much to see yet, much to do. I cannot imagine being tethered to a family at this point. But why would you believe I am a prize?" Kaydeh was curious, unsure how to respond.

"Your lineage is a good one; you are handsome, kind, gentle..."

"My lord, what do you know about my lineage?" Knitting his brows, he looked at the man before him with curious eyes. "Even I remember little of my childhood before you."

Kaydeh had always assumed his parents had fallen during the wars that plagued Fonecia. He knew he had somehow ended up in Kimbaru's camp after a particularly gruesome battle, but had never understood how. Because the commander had looked upon him

with cold eyes initially, he had been too afraid to ask. As the summers slid by, so did the thoughts about his lineage. He became Kimbaru's servant, child, and confidante. As time passed, he decided he was happy with this man, loyal to the point of risking his life for a tyrant who had a soft spot for orphaned children. They had spent many a day poring over manuscripts, trying out words from new languages. They even conversed in foreign tongues to signal one another in skirmishes. Kimbaru's words ignited a flame in him, however. Talk of families had always given rise to green envy, and, despite the commander's generally kind demeanor when it came to Kaydeh, he yearned to know more about his bloodline, perhaps even find surviving family out there.

"I suppose not." The response was vague and did little to assuage Kaydeh's growing concern.

"Commander?"

In that moment, all that he had known, the love he had borne for the older man, threatened to shatter. Trust was such a fragile thing; the fleeting thought came unbidden. The silence was beyond deafening and boiling blood sent a piercing noise through his ears.

"Commander Kimbaru, what do you know about my lineage?" He repeated the question once more, pronouncing each syllable, needing the man before him to assuage the guilt and the sudden tightening of his gut.

Cocking his head to the side, Kimbaru answered with honeyed tongue. "You are raising your voice, Son. It is not becoming of you."

Narrowing his eyes, the youth stood facing the man before him. "You evade the question."

"Perhaps. But your response is a curious one."

Legs spread wide as if ready for an attack, Kaydeh did not even try to hide his tremble, his bare chest glistening with beads of sweat, a ticking muscle on his neck. He was strung like an arrow, unsure if the pain suddenly welling up within him would be unleashed. Was he unfair? Why was he doubtful? A guilty conscience, an

uncertain future, and sudden revelations were never a good mix. Kaydeh's innards were in turmoil, and he did not know how to gentle the chaos.

"You turn on me so easily, boy?"

"I have not turned on you, nor will I ever. However, if you are hiding something from me, I would like to know about it before I risk life and limb for your glory." The stony expression said it all. The cherished innocence was fading, a hardened man appearing in his place. It was a good thing they were alone. Neither would enjoy a showdown with onlookers ready with wagging tongues. Kaydeh would protect Kimbaru even from himself; right now, however, he needed an honest answer.

"And if you learned I was the one to kill them?"

Shock registered on the youth's face. Tears pricked behind his eyes. All he could muster was a stutter. "You killed them?"

"Yes," he replied simply.

"You killed my family?" Eyes impossibly wide, lips trembling, heat rose through his body, radiating his rage. Hot and cold, Kaydeh could not understand what was happening. He was spiraling, and there seemed no end to it. Had he killed them? Baal, help me. Had the man he considered a father for many a summer been the one to strike down his kin?

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

Kimbaru was not fond of this conversation, but Kaydeh would never know. The frown on his lips, however, should have clued him in. Instead, the youth faced his commander who seemed to be curiously enjoying teasing him, each word only adding to his irritation.

"Explain!"

"It was a war; they got caught up. You were brought to me. What is there to explain?"

Fists clenched, and a punch went flying, smashing Kimbaru

square in the jaw. He should have expected that.

"Hitting me will not bring them back," Kimbaru countered, amused.

"You killed my family!"

Anger was coursing through him now. He did not know what to think, what to feel. Was everything he knew, every memory he had, a figment of his imagination? Had his parents died at the hands of Kimbaru's army?

Sighing, Kimbaru looked to the fading sun. "This is not as fun as I thought it might be. No, I did not directly kill them. They did, however, perish in the war against Fonecia." Leaning against the horse he had been caressing, he turned his head to his adoptive son. "While I might have enjoyed such torture with anyone else, I find myself unpleasantly worried about you. I hope my words are enough. You are dear to me, boy, though your family was not. If it is in my power, no harm should ever befall you."

Tears were freely streaming down Kaydeh's cheeks, falling in fat droplets to the ground. Holding onto his mare's saddle, he hiccupped before allowing the grief to consume him. Years of not mourning for a childhood loss now brought him to his knees as heavy sobs escaped him. Where the anger had heated his body, his current pain cooled him down, goosebumps appearing on his down-covered back. Kimbaru approached him, crouched low, and patted his shoulders.

"It might not be enough for you, but I will always be by your side," the commander stated gruffly. It was clear to the boy that the elder had pushed aside his pride and allowed him to see vulnerability. Kaydeh knew his adoration and loyalty were too essential and somehow filled a void Kimbaru had not known he had.

"Forgive me," Kaydeh managed between sobs. Suddenly throwing himself into Kimbaru's arms, he decided it did not matter. For the past eight summers, this man had cared for him, taught him; shared his thoughts and dreams. This man had been his to look up

to. Tightening his grip, he resolved to put the past where it belonged. As his superior, Kimbaru could command his loyalty. As the man who had raised him, Kaydeh would give him his unconditional love and forgiveness. His thoughts took the sting from the pain that engulfed him.

Disentangling himself from the embrace, Kaydeh straightened. Kimbaru was immediately on his feet as well.

"Thank you." Both spoke simultaneously. Both understood the meaning of those words, words that neither would ever repeat.

"Kaydeh, you should get going."

"I will be back with information as soon as I can, my lord. If I cannot leave for any reason, I know the trick to use with the birds."

"If you are not back before the gentle season, I will come after you."

Both hearts were suddenly unburdened. Tired eyes met with a fresh gaze, and both smiled tenderly, a small lift to tremulous lips. They would stick by one another through thick and thin. Kimbaru still scared Kaydeh, but he would try to temper the commander's passions. He was sure he would succeed in this endeavor. As he kicked his mare's flank and urged her onward, Kaydeh did not look back. The next time he faced Kimbaru, it would be with news of victory.

Part IV

Chapter Thirteen

Homecoming



Home was undoubtedly not what Arme expected. Standing at a distance, he noticed his wife and son playing with a ball of hay she had woven together. Dread in the pit in his stomach, he watched the duo. Did they miss him, he wondered. He did not know. Would they accept him? Uncertainty ate at his heart, and he realized he was stalling. He had been battling bloodlust for a moon span now, but this battle was with himself. All he had to do was make himself known, yet he could not bring himself to take another step. He felt dead to the world, but strangely as if he burned from the inside out.

Perhaps they believed he was never coming back. The fear of rejection was too intense, pushing him back the way he came as he concluded he should return at a later time. With a start he realized it was too late, a lump forming in his throat when gazes met and it felt like an eternity before movement registered.

"Father!"

A sweet boy, Arme thought. He was such a sweet boy, running toward the man he knew as his father. He was no longer fit for that role, though. No longer human. How could this sweet child love him now, when he was not sure he could ever love himself?

"Where have you been, Father?" Aran exclaimed, throwing himself into the older man's strong arms. He was careful not to squeeze too hard. He realized he could kill by merely making a fist now. The boy seemed not to notice the gold specks which had appeared in once deep brown eyes. The child hugged his father close while Arme fought against the well of emotions within him. He would enjoy this moment, he concluded, even if it may be their last embrace. Fiercely pulling Aran to his chest, he showered the boy's cheeks and forehead with kisses. Surprisingly, it only gentled the intense thirst he had been feeling. Was it indeed blood he craved? The question popped unexpectedly into his mind.

"Arme," Hayli whispered, tears streaming down her face. Upon closer inspection, Arme could see how his time away from home had aged his beloved wife. Lines etched by worry marred her once smooth skin, wrinkling her forehead and branching out from her soft lips that now seemed chapped from lack of proper hydration. Her misery was evident, and her eyes appeared almost bloodshot. What had happened to her?

"Hayli, my beauty."

Raising her nose in contempt, furiously wiping away the trails of salt on her face, she approached the duo only to give her son a kiss and then return to their home, their nest in a cave he had carved out himself. Comfortable, simple, and, with the furs on the walls and the ground, quite warm. Lifting his son over his shoulders,

much to the boy's delight, Arme followed her in, unsure if he was ready for the coming confrontation.

"Father, can we go and play by the stream?" Hopeful eyes bored into his shattered look. It was a good thing the innocence of youth protected him from the emotions so clearly emanating from the new *dakhanavar*. It would have killed Arme to have to explain what had happened to him right now.

"No, Son. However, I would love it if you could bring some fish for me to skin and cook," he smiled.

Grinning happily, Aran whooped and ran out. Fish cooked by his father was a welcome dinner.

Once he left, Arme turned to his love. "Hayli," he beseeched.

"You did not say a word!" Her eyes flashed, hands clenched into fists. Her anger was palpable. "You left without saying a word!"

"I did say I had things to do," he responded feebly. Approaching his furious wife, Arme gathered her in his arms, forcing himself to be gentle. Oh, how he loved this woman, but how does one face his second half when he had wronged her so?

"What things?"

Gazing into the flashing blue of her irises, he reached out to graze fingers against her cheek.

"You smell different," she whispered, hands grabbing onto his vest, forehead suddenly pressed against his chest. She seemed unsure as to whether she should push him away or pull him closer. She had missed him, it was clear, but he did not deserve her. Not now. Not anymore.

"Yes," was his only response.

"Talk to me," she begged in a small voice. "My chest hurts. I thought you were dead! We were told you were dead!" Tears threatened to fall from her eyes once more. Arme's heart constricted as it became clear she had cried herself to sleep for the duration of his absence. He had dared to appear before her now after all she

had gone through for so long without a word from him. It made him feel so very small before her.

Turning his head to the side, he muttered. "My brother has married."

"Yes, I heard." She responded with knit brows and perplexed expression. "We were not invited."

Threading fingers through his long dark hair, Arme looked up and to the side. The waves fell down his back like a cascade of nightfall, the ends curling around his back. Trying to find the right words to placate his woman, he bit at the inside of his cheek. He knew she would have wanted to be there, even as a mere spectator.

"I was there."

"You were?" Screeching accusingly, she appeared to want to slap him, hurt him, and tear him apart. "Why are you hiding things? Why did you decide not to take Aran and I with you? I do not understand what is happening! A priestess came by instructing us to send a message confirming your passing. We mourned for you!"

"Who came to you?" he had paled at the thought of the elder priestess coming to his home. The moment he realized she was not indeed dead, or, at the least, had regained her mortal body somehow after death, was probably the most frightened he had ever been. Beyond everything which occurred a moon's span ago, it was the rising of a dead priestess that still shook him to the core. And Haya had been there. Haya!

"A young one, barely older than Aran in appearance, but her manner and speech were strange."

Nodding, he was glad it had not been Hayisi.

"It is not what you think, my love," he tried to explain. "I was instructed by the priestess, as well; the High Priestess tended to me over the past moon span; it was she who informed me about my duty to strike the ceremonial drum. None knew I was there, let alone my brother. I did not know he was told I was dead, however. It is better this way, I suppose. The realm could erase me from

memory this way."

He did not want to give away the pain he felt lancing through him at the thought of being fully forgotten. He did not want to be dead, he realized. Not even temporarily.

Confused, Hayli seemed to be searching for something in his eyes. He wondered why she had not yet commented on the golden specs in there. Pushing the issue to the side for now, he thought of ways to appease the lovely creature before him. A royal marriage not attended by kin was unheard of and inexplicably disturbing, no matter how far they were in terms of ranking and distance. He knew she was thinking they had been abandoned, and that would not do at all.

"Why did we need to believe in your death?" Her question startled him, though he should have been ready for it. Now was as good a time as any to get down to the core of things, it seemed.

Taking a deep breath, he implored her to be understanding. "There is a prophecy hinged on my successful transformation into the protector, the warrior-servant of the gods. There needs to be no doubt in anyone's mind as to the royal succession. By striking the drums, I took on a role not normally assigned to a regular man. I blessed the couple and the summer of peace before the coming of an enemy that is likely to burn us alive. I have yet to come to terms with all this myself."

She paled at his words. "Enemy?"

"Yes, but there is much to be done. Do you forgive me for this?"

"You took on the role of Arorti." Her words were not a question. There was a link in her mind, and she appeared to be puzzling out the pieces, though she could not see the full picture without his confessions.

"Yes, but no one knew it was I in the mountains."

"Why?"

"Because the priestess ordered this. I had no say in the matter.

Soon, however, he will know it was a mere fabrication. The people had to believe the drumbeat was indeed that of the gods. Aside from the High Priestess, I am the closest one can come to understand their powers in our world at the moment. At least, that is what I've been told."

"But it was you, not the gods," Hayli uttered, confused.

"Yes, but as a messenger of the gods."

"What of this enemy?" She needed to know more about the circumstances that would drive her peace-loving, earth-tilling husband to such unexpected and possibly drastic steps.

"Hush, my love; just hold me close."

Squeezed into his arms, Hayli gave in to the embrace. The worry did not leave her, however. There were so many questions whirling in her mind; she had the answers to none.

"Tell me what happened, my husband."

"I am different," he spoke gruffly. When Hayli tried to pull away to look into his eyes, he tightened his embrace. "Just a little more time," he begged brokenly.

"Arme?"

"Please Hayli, love me just a little more."

"I could never stop loving you!"

Pushing against his chest, she disentangled herself. Holding onto his forearms, she took a closer look, trying to take him in completely. Suddenly, she gasped.

"Gold! Your eyes have glazed over in gold!"

"Yes, my heart," he murmured, lowering his gaze.

"How?"

"I told you. I am different now, and not in any way you could imagine." He knew she was becoming frustrated with his words. He finally allowed the tears to fall. All his frustration and his pain,

mixed with his resignation and anger for his weakness rolled off deeply tan skin with a now mystical sheen.

"Your tears... they look almost red?"

"Do they?" Flustered, he did not know how to digest this new bit of information.

"Yes. Gold in your eyes, tears like watered blood, visits from priestesses, a strange scent that is almost inhuman..."

"Is it detestable?" He cringed at his question, unsure he even wanted an answer.

"No, but I'm not sure if I should like it or not." Wrinkling her nose, she sniffed against his neck. "It's almost... otherworldly."

"It might be because it is."

Confused, Hayli waited for him to continue.

"I ask only one thing of you, my soul."

"Anything you wish, Husband."

"Love me with the passion you have always held. Never stop loving me and do not ever leave my side."

Hayli narrowed her eyes, knitting her brows and wondering what her beloved was getting at.

"Promise me," his strained voice finally broke through the haze in her mind, causing a shiver to travel down her spine.

"Of course! I can never stop loving you. I already said that. I promise."

"Love me, even if I am no longer the man you thought I was."

The pain in his eyes was so pronounced, she gasped. His tears, his pain, everything about him was so different, and he knew she would ponder over his words for some time still.

"Hayli, I am a *dakhanavar* now."

"A what?"

"A creature of the gods. Something beyond human. In essence, I am dead to this world and alive only for whatever plans the gods have for me. Ar has scorched me, and Haya breathed new meaning into my mortality. There is still much I must discover about what I am. While I am still very much in control of my decisions, at least I believe so, it is as if my emotions are in an imbalance and my body is still becoming accustomed to whatever it has morphed into."

"What are you speaking about?" Perplexed, the simple woman faced a convoluted description of what her husband had allowed the priestesses to do. So, he did explain, in full detail. Eyes wide, she quietly listened as he did not spare her any of the particulars.

"You are immortal?"

"Yes, according to the messengers of Haya. I will live so long as the royal family requires my strength. I will die when the gods decide I am no longer needed in this world."

"How cruel!"

Glistening gold implored sky blue to understand, at least somewhat. "Perhaps for you and I. But I have become something much greater than our uncomplicated mortal life requires. Without the powers I yield, the priestess's prophecies point toward destruction."

"I need to sit down."

"Yes." Nodding, he pulled her over to the carpet-covered stone bench they frequently lounged on while creating word and mind games. It was where they held serious discussions or merely relaxed after the day's toils. Today, it was where they faced each other not just as husband and wife, but as mortal and beast.

"You gave me an oath!" She finally ground out her words. "You assured me we would stay together until we were so old, we could no longer even hold our great-grandchildren. That we would die together, entwined in a lover's embrace when our bodies refused to work anymore. We were supposed to live a simple life with the villagers, never coveting more. All we needed was our family."

Whipping her head back and forth, she tried to drown out his words, to keep hold of a dream that had brought her so much joy. He had been her sunshine, her guiding light. With him, she had felt free of the confines of her world, his kind nature bringing out the best in her. All she had known was disappearing, and she did not know how to keep the walls of the home they had built together from crumbling around them.

Suddenly feeling drained and weary, her skin pale and bloodshot eyes impossibly wide, Hayli collapsed, head back against the wall and eyes staring straight up. He joined her as they stared into nothingness in disquiet, fingers finding one another for the comfort of the other's touch.

While the light from the sun began to dim, Hayli regained her composure. The gold in his eyes was more prominent now, speaking to her more curious nature. As the initial shock subsided, questions began to slip from her lips unbidden. "What powers do you have?"

"I do not understand everything yet, but I know I have heightened senses, the ability to foretell the approach of danger. I can jump high, swim deep; and I feel stronger. I even battled a lion on my way home," he added with a triumphant smile, turning to face her profile.

"You defeated a lion..." She was in shock; that much was clear. He would give her every explanation she required until she was satisfied.

"Yes." He stood up, forcing her gaze to him. Bending a knee, he kissed her fingers as he tried to convey the one thing that most certainly had not changed: his love. "I am stronger than twenty men combined, faster than the fastest creature you can think of. I can jump so far it feels like I could fly. And it feels amazing. I cannot be killed. Though I bleed, I heal quickly. I do not know if I have any vulnerabilities."

After a pregnant pause, Hayli whispered almost inaudibly.

"Me."

"What?"

"You love me. That could bring you harm."

Frowning, he stared at her. It made sense, of course, but he was not sure he wanted to grasp the meaning behind it.

"I told him you had gone on an adventure and would come with gifts. I did not want him to give up hope for ever seeing you again."

Laughing at the abrupt change in subject, he was happy she had not scorned him. "I will give him something, of course!"

Reaching into his tunic, Arme removed two small gifts. He fastened a comb of bone he had learned to make during the past fortnight into her hair, earning a shy smile and sweet blush. "You remembered me?" She spoke wonderingly.

"How could I forget?" He was incredulous. Did she honestly believe he could leave her? "You are my wife, but more than that, you are my life."

Smiling happily, she hugged him close. "I will stand by you through thick and thin. Please do not leave me again."

The golden gaze flickered, and his smile slipped. "I will have to. I must see my brother. It's imperative I confer with them about a few things and present myself at court, not as his kin, but as a warrior of unmatched power. Perhaps not immediately, but sometime soon."

She looked for a moment as if he had slapped her before her voice betrayed her fear. "You cannot! You cannot go to court! They will never allow you to come back to me."

Sadness marred his features, the rekindling of anger hers. Hayli could come to accept him as he was, but she was not ready to lose him to politics. They had remained far from it all. The world was spinning now, and neither knew how to feel about it.

"Hayli, I'm dead."

With knitted brows, she felt for her husband's beating heart, hands reaching under his tunic for the warmth that typically

emanated from the passionate man. Releasing a sigh of relief, she placed her fingers over his chest, and he wondered if she counted the beats.

"A metaphor. You are alive and well and back with your family."

"No, my sweet love, I am dead. At least from a human standpoint. I am no longer the Arme you knew, at least in terms of my physical being, as I did indeed die and was reborn. I am a creature of the gods; a weapon and, according to the priestesses, nothing more. I am allowed to keep up the pretense of a mortal lifestyle, but the truth is that I am an anomaly. I should not exist, if not for the deepest, and possibly darkest, magic of the gods." There was passion in his voice, but something more lacing it; resignation and reverence had mixed into one, and he knew she noticed. He had come to terms with his decision. There was no going back. It did not make the situation any easier to swallow, of course. He knew it would be even harder on her.

"What are you telling me?"

"I do not know what I have become exactly, but I thirst for more than water, hunger for more than food. Aran calmed the torment within me, and your very presence has kept it at bay, but I am still reeling from it all. I require more than human food can offer." Lowering his head in shame and removing her hands from his body, he uttered words he knew she would never be able to forget. "I require blood to retain my sanity, my humanity. Without it, I might as well be a mindless vessel of destruction."

"Please explain..."

"I need blood. I have found I can access emotions, information, and even memories when I drink. It also keeps my own memories from fading, my humanity from slipping away. It is driven by anger, by pain. I do not understand how to stop it, but simply being near the two of you has most definitely quieted the loud buzz in my mind urging me to seek more." Turning toward the doorway, he let his shoulders fall. "I understand if you would prefer I leave and never return."

"Stop! Enough! Instead of holding me, kissing me, and telling me you will never leave me again, you speak about politics and monsters and gods and bloodlust. Please! Stop it!"

Falling to her knees, Hayli gave in to her emotions. The separation had been hard, but his presence was now destroying any remaining hopes she had managed to hold on to. Their quiet, happy, loving life would be no more. As a wife, she had to figure out a way to accept it. As a heartbroken woman, she wished to curse at the gods. She wanted to scream in joy that he was alive and well. Instead, his story had plunged her into a forlorn state of misery.

"I'm so very sorry for all of this," he whispered. "I knew there would be no redemption."

"I do not care! I do not care what you are." She raised her voice before whimpering, "Please don't leave me again."

Surprised, he turned to her crumpled form, the devastation in her look enough to pull him back into their home, their haven. Gathering her in his arms, he kissed her closed lids, savoring her scent, her gentleness. He should not hurt her. He could not hurt her. For now, he would stay here by her side. The gods would call him when it was time to go. Please, please, he begged silently. Let me comfort her for a time. Small kisses feathered across her temples, her slightly bumpy nose, her little shell ears, her square jaw, and full lower lip. He kissed every wrinkle, every freckle from her time spent working under the sun. She was his life. He loved her so much; he was near bursting with it. Tonight, he would love her as only a husband could; slow and beautiful, every curve traced and imprinted to memory. His tongue would flick across salty skin, tickle her until she could no longer stifle her giggles. He imagined her riding him to oblivion, only to have the images scatter the moment he heard an excited voice behind them.

"Father! I have the fish."

Mirth suddenly welled up in Arme's heart, and laughter bubbled so loud that his sizeable body shook with it. Hayli joined in. They would get through this; they had to. Looking into his eyes,

she whispered her vow to love him, no matter where it took her, Haya and Ar be damned.



Days blended as a fortnight passed, and then another, an entire moon span for Arme and Hayli to try to make peace with all which had occurred. The household was in constant turmoil, however, with Aran often sent out before another battle ensued.

"Can we have more children?" Hayli had been mulling over the thought for a while. After Aran, she had lost two pregnancies. The pain of not being able to carry to term had always weighed her down. She craved for the quickening in her womb, the heaviness that came with producing a new life form. Lately, her fingers often trailed down to her nearly flat abdomen, searching for signs of life. She looked upon the small bit of belly left after her last pregnancies reverently, imagining its growth and roundness once more. She felt empty; the emotion gnawed at her slowly. She wanted more children, a biological response quite specific to the female sex. Arme had also desired a dozen happy babes in their home, constantly underfoot.

Looking at her sadly, Arme finally confessed. "No, I do not believe we can."

Snapping her head to the side to look at her husband as they lounged in bed one lazy morning, the blood drained from her cheeks.

"What? Do you mean you physically cannot anymore? You have been performing quite well in bed..." Incredulous, she stared at her husband as she puzzled over his declaration. The thought seemed so absurd that it was almost logical. He insisted on having died by the hand of the High Priestess before rejoining the living. Emotions swirled as the gentle bliss of the morning faded from her mind. "I was just wondering if you wanted to try for more."

"I'm sorry, my life. The priestess mentioned at one point during the process that I could no longer sire children. It might be possible, of course, but I do not know if I can." Shifting closer to his wife, he touched forehead to forehead, as if willing her to forgive him for this. She refused to accept it. How can the gods be so cruel?

"You knew this?"

He remained quiet as she recoiled, as if struck by a snake when he reached out.

"You knew, but you said nothing about so important a matter? You knew, and you allowed for this sorcery to occur? Why?" Shrieking, she did not care that Aran had run over, eyes wide. Hayli had talked to the boy about the changes his father had gone through, not at all surprised the astute child had noticed quite a few things already. It had become near impossible to keep the tension from him, however, as each day made it more apparent that the calm and steady life they were accustomed to would never return.

"Mother?" The boy seemed quite frightened, and while her heart went out to him, she did not look his way.

"Aran, please go outside," both parents grumbled, not paying their living son any attention.

Hanging his head, the boy seemed to want to say something but left their home instead, traveling to the tranquility of the nearby brook. Hayli sighed, thinking this was for the best. At least no one would rebuke him there for appearing where he should not be. This had been a common occurrence of late, continually sending him away. The loving father had become a dark shell of the hero Aran had once worshiped, and Hayli knew she had lost her gentle nature and raised her voice more often than not. They were always fighting, a constant duel of words when they came together now.

Unbeknownst to her, Aran was having some darker thoughts of his own. Is this what a couple became over time, he questioned, the dancing dragonflies and croaking frogs his only companions for the day once more. Despondently staring into the gurgling waters, Aran decided he would never love anyone. The sight would have

broken his parents' hearts if they had been witness to such a scene.

"We should not have done that," Arme said for the tenth time in mere days. He hated pushing his son away. It hurt to see the pain that colored Aran's features ever since his return. The happy boy who greeted him the day he came home was almost gone. Instead, a more mature, sad, but, thankfully, still innocent being had taken his place. Someday soon, even that light of hope may disappear. The thought depressed the proud man, for he loved his son dearly.

"Aran will be fine. Answer me, husband!"

"Hayli, please. Think about the family we already have. I have not left home, but home has disappeared for me. This is not how we should be acting with one another..."

"You are keeping secrets. You have gone and changed your very essence. What is the point of you remaining at home anyhow? Now, you dare deny me the beauty of motherhood again?"

"Mind your tongue, woman. I have remained here to please you."

"You have done nothing to please me!"

"No, I suppose not. I have been a terrible husband," he spoke sarcastically. Gold-flecked brown met with an angry blue. It was such a lovely blue, too. It was unfortunate that those naturally sculpted golden brows were so often contorted into a rather undesirable shape.

"You have been no husband! You've only warmed my nights, but the days have been cold and lacking in the affection I once knew."

Lightly scoffing, Arme cocked his head to the side. "You are correct. Your shrewish nature has alienated me. Where you were once sweet and loving, you are now constantly harping about one thing or another. Everything I do is a reason for battle with you."

"You horrible man! You were once humble and now... now, you expect the world to bow to you."

Laughing at this point, Arme pivoted on his feet and strode out the door to find his son. If there was anyone who still cared about him, it was the lad.



Upon their return home once the sun had begun to set against the horizon, the duo met with a sight so unusual, they froze in place.

"Arme, I'm sorry. I'm so very sorry." Her eyes looked clear, and it was almost as if the pain of the past fortnight had melted away. Unsure how this had occurred, husband regarded wife with a tilt of the head and half-lidded eyes.

"For what, my darling heart?"

Her breathing broke through the silence that followed, the rise and fall of her chest rustling against her bodice, toes pointed toward the man in question, though he wondered if she debated fleeing. There was something quite pitiful about the set of her jaw, the pout of her lips.

"For allowing my doubts and my pain to swallow me."

"That is nothing to apologize for, my beauty." His gaze softened ever so slightly, but Arme held his ground. The insults he had endured as he allowed her time to come to terms with his changes were often unbearable. He knew she was suffering, but her behavior had been abominable. It was as though a rather detestable lookalike replaced his formerly loving wife.

"You cannot even accept an apology now?" Lowering her head, she appeared prostrate before him. "I do not want to quarrel, and I do not want this hatred in our home. There is too much negativity. Aran has not been feeling very well of late either." Arme understood it was all said out of sincerity, while their son had tensed by his side, a clear indication that the glares, the spiteful words, the lack of intimacy between a once loving couple had

indeed affected him. If it felt like daggers had embedded in his own heart, only Ar knew how much the lad was affected by all this.

Sighing, Arme replied, "Yes, Hayli, I can. However, it was not the fact that you were in pain which brought us to this moment. It was because you refused to accept me as I was, despite your vows to do so. You promised me your love would not change. I have loved you unfailingly, you know this. Things have become harder, I do not deny this, but my personality or who I am at the core is much the same, at least for the most part. Yes, the sun's glare can be painful at times; yes, the salt waters seem to scorch my skin if I end up swimming for too long. I know because I tried running toward the ocean, hoping to enjoy the day not too long ago. Yes, I require a certain amount of blood from time to time. But I do not kill, I do not maim; the priestesses are always ready with an offering when I visit them. You look upon me as if a monster, however, not a chosen warrior of the gods. I have obligations, both through my birthright and through my status as *dakhanavar*. You know I would run away from it all if I could, but then, what type of example would I be setting for Aran? How would you be able to face the coward I become? I would die from the pure shame of such a decision. You know how I feel, Hayli. You also know what duty means."

Nodding, she did not speak as his words wounded her anew.

"Hayli, tell me you understand. I beg of you, my love." He stepped closer, lifting her face to his.

"I can almost hear the battle waging within you. Your struggles have fed into my fear of you."

Laughing mirthlessly, Arme dropped his hand. "Wife, your place by my side is to be my backbone, my immovable boulder to hold on to. Not to take my pain upon yourself, and, once you realize it is indeed too much, lash out at me. You have been hurting me with nearly every word you have uttered from the day I returned."

Trembling shoulders and loud sobs greeted this tirade. What had they become? Shaking his head and sighing, he pulled her close. "I love you, Hayli. I always have and always will. Please.

Allow us to enjoy the time we have for now. The priestess mentioned we may enjoy the following turn of the season, and we can ensure it is full of happiness where we can be by each other's side. I will need to report to the court sooner or later, however."

"Yes," she replied quietly.

Confused at her change in attitude, Arme tried to discern her features. With her head lowered once more, however, that proved an attempt at futility. "Yes?"

"I understand, Husband. I have been fighting it. I have been fighting you. However, this is not me! I am kind and sweet and loving. At least that is what I saw myself as. When you looked at me, there was adoration there, not trepidation. We never fought; we never even raised a voice. So yes. I will come to terms with it. I will accept that we can never go back to our peaceful lives. It's an impossibility, and I have been woefully selfish. Please, forgive me?"

It was heartfelt. Arme could see it in the contrite woman's eyes. The determination, the resolve; they were some of the many things he had loved about his gentle wife. She was soft, yes, but she was strong. Malleable, but firm. She was a beautiful paradox, and he had never stopped waiting for her to come back to him. His smile could have rivaled the sun in brightness.

"My sweet wife, it would be a sin not to forgive you. Haya would strike me down!" Feigning an arrow through the heart, Arme grinned.

Finally, the tears stopped, and she let out a laugh. "I love you, Husband!"

"And I you, Wife."

Bashfully lifting her gaze and lowering her lashes, Hayli embraced the man before her.

"I am a man in your eyes once again, my sweet?"

"Yes, you're very much a man," she teased.

Noticing where this was going, he turned to Aran and smiled,

nodding toward the door. The boy grinned, seeming quite happy that his parents had made up. He did not put up a fight; instead, he all but skipped out of their home, allowing the couple some much-needed privacy.

"Such a mischievous gaze, *hokis*," he smirked.

"*Hokis*?"

"Ah! Yes, you don't know the language of the gods, the old language. It means, my soul." Flicking a finger against her lobe, lips feathered kisses across her neck. Giggling at the feeling as well as the endearment, Hayli giddily caressed his back, the motion eliciting soft gasps from her lover. Fingers entwined through his hair. Hands moved down to her hips, pulling her flush against his body. Groaning with desire, he skimmed his fingers against her skirts, the fabric brushing against her legs acting as an extra stimulant, bringing a flush to limbs and face.

"The gods? Silly man. You are my god tonight!" Throwing her head back as hot lips found her pulse and sucked, Hayli whispered a prayer in gratitude for the man she called husband.

"Only for tonight, takuhis?"

"Another endearment?"

"My queen," he grinned, nibbling against her ear.

Laughing breathlessly, she pulled up her leg and held onto his hip like a vise, flashes of pleasure radiating into her mind. "Tonight, tomorrow night, every night!"

Growling playfully, he hiked her leg higher until she was standing on tiptoe, body pulled about like a very willing marionette. The kisses trailed lower over her dress as he teased her without mercy. "Goddess, you taste so good."

She never failed to affect him so. She reveled in this power over him. Muscles strung tight with desire, his body begged for release.

Pushing her away suddenly, he roughly demanded, "Take off your clothes."

"No," she smiled demurely.

Her body hummed with anticipation. She could feel the tension growing within her beloved, and it stirred her like nothing else. She wanted him. Dear Haya, she wanted him down to her very core. She wanted him to go down to her core very much, she smirked, her mind already choreographing this particular lustful dance.

"No?" A dangerous glint of gold bore into shining blue.

"No. What will you do about that, my black stallion?"

Lips curving ever so slightly, rough hands grabbed at her body, bringing her into their room and pushing her down against their pelt covered bed. The fur beneath her tickled her skin, causing goosebumps to rise ever so delicately, an incredible addition to the already impossible sensations. There was a pulse low in her belly, wetness between her legs. Clenching and unclenching, she waited for his next move.

Allowing her to squirm a little beneath him, powerful arms braced beside her head. Placing a knee between her legs, he moved it upward, bringing her skirts along for the ride. Arching her back, she allowed herself to become lost in the emotions his every touch and every delicate kiss against her erect nipples invoked.

"Tell me you want me."

"I want all of you!"

"Tell me you need me."

"I will never stop needing you!"

"Tell me you love me."

"Until the end of my days, I will love you. So help me Ar!"

He entered her triumphantly, callused hands gripping supple hips as he rode her hard. Undulating beneath him, she tried to gasp for air between crushing kisses that left her clawing at him for more.

She moved with him, matching step for step, thrust for thrust. Raising herself higher, she clung so tight, she was barely touching

the bed beneath them. His breathing hitched, a grumble forming in his throat.

Grinning impishly, she pushed up from underneath him before settling with his back against the wall and her astraddle, her movements wild but rhythmic. She loved taking control toward the end, and he certainly deserved the break. Hayli steadily built up the pleasure, teasing as she pulled away and earning soft moans with each thrust down to envelop him in her sweet warmth. Legs around his waist as he greedily eyed her naked form, she dipped back and down, opening herself up to new sensations, lust drowning out all thoughts beyond the act of love at its most basic. Pleasure rippling in waves, they cried in ecstasy together, eyes shining with renewed ardor and an insatiable passion that would keep them busy until the paling of the sky once more.

Chapter Fourteen

Motherhood



Retching for the third time that evening, Hayli swayed on her feet. Her stomach rumbled with sharp hunger, but nothing stayed down. It felt as if she was dying, with no end to the turmoil within her in sight. Fingernails digging into the wooden fencing of their animal pen, she heaved once more before biting down on her lips to keep from crying.

"Hayli! Again?" Concerned, Arme left the wood he had been chopping on the ground and hurried over to his wife. She had been weak for days now and wholly unable to keep anything down. At first, they thought she had eaten rotten fruit. Then they wondered if it was the meat. Finally, they debated calling the village herbalist over; now, he was confident they should.

"Aran!"

Scampering over the moment he heard his mother's wretched groans, Aran stared wide-eyed at his parents, who had enjoyed peace only for a brief period before this mysterious illness. He looked frightened, though Arme had bigger issues to contend with.

"Yes, Father?"

"Can you fetch the herbalist, Son?"

"Of course! I will run so fast he will be here before the sun sets!" Immediately setting off, Aran headed to the edge of their cave village, where most of the homes were built close together. He knew where the herbalist would be, and it was most certainly not in the caves themselves. The man was a hermit and preferred his underground hovel.

Having found the healer in question, Aran had the forethought to ask the man's wife to join them, thinking it would bring added comfort. Arme had carried Hayli to their bed and covered her shivering form. She looked so pale lying there before him, it made his heart race in a frantic beat. Her moaning, clammy skin and hollowed eyes were impossible to ignore. She was a terrible sight; he made sure to keep a basket full of cloth, as well as cold spring water nearby to blot the perspiration away. Praying she had not come down with a deadly ailment, he fidgeted until shuffling sounded from outside of their heavy rug of a door.

Entering the room, the two people he trusted most in the world—outside his wife and blood kin—immediately approached Hayli while Aran hung back to watch their ministrations.

"Highness," they bowed in unison before moving forward.

"Has she been feeling hot?" The man asked the basic questions, appraising his patient.

"Not that I know of, no," he answered hesitantly. Arme felt miserable inside. Everything had been going so well of late, and he had hoped the gods would spare him more pain.

The woman who had been quietly examining his wife suddenly spoke up. "When was her last lunar flow?"

"Lunar flow?"

"Yes, dear, the blood cycle."

Paling at the question, Arme thought back. He had not noticed it in quite a while. Then again, he tried to ignore such things as

much as possible. Hayli was self-conscious as it was and would leave the house for days to join with other women in similar condition from time to time, a retreat in the fields each moon span. Then again, this practice depended on the season. Sometimes she did not go for quite some time. She was rarely away long enough for him to miss her much, though.

"I honestly could not tell you. A fortnight? Moon span? Over a summer?"

Laughing at his perplexed expression, she asked another.

"When was the last time you lay together?"

Now the blood came flushing back, warming his cheeks.

"It has been often of late. Last night even."

Aran's eyes widened, and he turned away. This was not a conversation for his ears.

Chuckling at the boy's embarrassment, the woman pulled the pelts away and began feeling around her belly. "Has she shown any food aversions?"

"Yes. Strangely, fish no longer appeals to her. I thought she was teasing us, though. We always have fish for breakfast."

"Hmmm... Hayli only retches in the evenings?"

"Generally, yes. It has been so for many days now since the moon was last dark. Sometimes in the mornings, but usually, she is down on her knees as the sun begins to set, emptying any and everything she managed to keep down during the day. She is lighter now, and so very frail. I don't know what to do."

"Are you afraid?"

"Is that even a question?" Nearly bellowing his outrage at her audacity, Arme stood to full height.

The woman's smile stretched ear to ear in that moment, causing Arme to seriously question her sanity. He tried to remember how she had taken him in when the world abandoned him.

"You have no guesses as to what it could be?"

Frustrated, he wondered if it would be a crime to strike the witch. Of course, he loved the woman too much to hurt her; but she was trying his patience dearly.

"She is with child."

"Impossible!"

"You said you've been laying with her, correct?"

"Of course! She's my wife. What else would one expect?" Scowling at her mirth, Arme tried to wrap his mind around this. Impossible! The priestess had assured him such a thing could not happen. He had fought with his wife about this. How could it be that a babe had formed? Why?

"I do not exactly understand your confusion, my son," the herbalist muttered with amusement. "You have one child already. You surely know how the process works..."

Dumbfounded, he looked at the couple closely. Did they genuinely think him so dumb?

"I am unable to conceive," he finally conceded.

Now, it was the couple's turn to be confused. A virile young man who cannot conceive? What in Ar's name was he rambling about?

"You must be mistaken. Please, take another look. I cannot lose my Hayli. I beg of you!"

Sharing glances, the couple shrugged. "Your wife has no symptoms other than that of pregnancy. I checked her fully. From the descriptions you provided, it is the best possible conclusion. Keep an eye on her, in any case. If it continues for longer than another fortnight, you will need to find us again. However, I believe she will be fine. In the meantime, find some ginger root and grind it before massaging it onto her tummy. Ensure she is not exposed to strong scents and keep her meals light. There is a merchant from the east who brings an interesting but very tangy yellow fruit. She might not like the sour taste so much, but it should help ease her

symptoms a little. Dried bread for her meals, as well as baked chickpeas. If you need anything, do not be afraid to get us." The herbalist nodded to his wife, who returned the gesture. "It is unlikely we are wrong, but of course we do not say it is impossible."

"You are sure?"

"My dear boy, are you not happy about this?"

Mulling over the implications, Arme tried not to become too excited by the prospect of fathering a second child. Perhaps he would live this time around? Maybe the goddess would bless them with a daughter?

"I was under the impression the gods no longer saw me fit to be a father. I'm sorry if I have alarmed you. However, if what you say is true and Hayli is indeed pregnant, I will personally sacrifice a bull to share with our village folk upon the child's safe delivery."

Bowing their heads slightly in respect to Arme's station — though they would never speak of the man's past with anyone — the couple moved toward the entrance of the prince's home.

"I have one other request, if you please?"

"Yes, highness?" They stared at the man, who seemed to suddenly exude immense power as he looked upon them with gold-flecked eyes they found themselves drowning in.

"I ask that you forget who I am by birth. Arme, brother to the king, is dead. The realm must believe this."

Shocked and confused, the herbalists were at a loss for words.

"Do not worry, I know you have revealed nothing. This is just a cautionary note. I simply ask that you treat me as the rest of the village does, an ordinary man. Even at home, do not treat me differently. Do not use my titles. Hayara believes I perished from an illness brought by merchants from the east. Even my brother has been informed of this and given time to mourn me. He continues to send my wife the money and resources necessary to live on, of course, but it is imperative the narrative remains so, at least until

the future becomes clearer to the priestesses of Hayara. I implore you, do not allow any to learn of my identity. In the days to come, it will be imperative for the protection of my family. You have cared for me since I was a child, and for that I am grateful. I trust you with my life."

Nodding in understanding, the couple bowed low. "Yes, Arme. We will always consider you our favorite, our adopted son, our orphan from the southern nation of Hatti. You have been to us the child we never had. None have suspected anything to date, and none will from now on. Your reasons for such drastic measures are your own. We will respect any and all decisions you make."

Smiling as they understood one another, the couple finally hurried out into the night. The sun had set a while back, and they lit fire lamps for light. Turning to his sleeping wife, Arme sat on the bed. Aran appeared by his father's side.

"Will Mother be all right?" The boy was apprehensive, and Arme could only embrace him for comfort.

"Yes, my son. If the gods are good, her happiness will know no bounds."

Chapter Fifteen

Double Pregnancy



Greyish blue-green eyes opened lazily as she lay on her soft wool and linen bed within the castle walls. Hayadusta smiled, happy, her naked body adorned in goosebumps from the slight chill where the fur blanket had slid off her skin. The new queen purred with delight as she stretched out cramped limbs. Her lids felt heavy, mind languid, and her body felt exquisitely well-loved. Swollen lips and the light love bites on her shoulders and chest reminded her of all that which had transpired once again. Her smile was serene, heartbeat slow and steady, quite unlike the night before. Craning her neck, she pushed herself into a tight bow, feeling every vertebra crack.

Queen she may be, but the nights her husband visited, she was merely his courtesan, his secret lover with skills she found required little perfecting. They liked to play games, teasing each sense separately until they could take no more. It made her especially hot inside to dress up as a royal mistress, even now imagining the look on her king's face when he discovered her in a new costume, ready to take him on a wild ride. A sly grin on her face, Hayadusta hoisted herself out of bed and padded over to her wash basin. The priestesses were the ones to renew the water in her rooms, and that

suitied her perfectly well. Slaves should steer clear of the royal chambers, she thought. There were too many dangers with keeping a slave close.

Slipping into her red silk robe, a truly exquisite gift from the Xin monarchy, she covered herself just as the heavy wooden door swung open. While the man who strode in had long become immune to the beauty of the carvings that he now touched so carelessly, the portrait displayed on the inner side of the door caught the light of the sun where the gold was inlaid and once again stole her breath away. She would have to find the artist behind these incredible creations, as there were still so many plain walls and doors to cover with magnificent designs. She would attend to them soon enough, she concluded.

"Good morning, Husband," she spoke huskily, the remnants of the night's passions still lingering and that of sleep lowering it to a touch above a whisper she knew would please him much.

"Good morning, Wife," Arameni responded, swooping in for a kiss.

"I want to redecorate a little," Hayadusta announced suddenly.

Perplexed, Arameni tilted his head to the side. "Your room?"

"The entire castle," she grinned, pleased he was starting to startle less at her impulsive demands.

"That sounds... frightening, my love," the king hedged. "While I am becoming accustomed to your mood swings, my sweet, it is almost jarring to see you quite tranquil one moment and a bouncing ball of sunshine the next. Please spare me!"

Mesmerized, he watched her worry her lips.

"You do not approve?"

"I do not know what to say, *hokis*. You are mistress of this castle. You have every right to change things as you wish. I cannot fathom what you are thinking this time, however."

Before she could retort, a sudden knock on the door had the two

straightening and pulling apart, the queen clutching at her robes tightly to ensure her modesty. Since the only other men allowed in her room were Arodi and Aris, and only with urgent messages, the monarchs were generally prepared for these knocks.

"Come in!" Arameni scowled as Aris poked his head in. Hayadusta frowned at his tone. The boy had become invaluable to those at court, wise and quick, with a good head on his shoulders. However, his ease of access to the queen's chambers did not sit well with everyone. Arameni was among this group of grumbling men who protested a little too much for her tastes.

"Forgive me, your majesties, but I have news which cannot wait."

Hayadusta sensed the hesitation in the boy's voice and gently urged him on.

"You are free to speak, my sweet."

Nodding to his queen, Aris turned to the imposing man who had inched just slightly closer to her. Hayadusta noticed the boy's gaze and could tell he was doing his very best to hide a knowing smirk. Her young friend knew a jealous man from a field away, and the king's possessiveness was not lost on him, particularly where Aris was concerned. She had yet to understand the full extent of the cause but reckoned no man enjoyed it when a male not of blood relation befriended a woman, especially one of Hayadusta's rank and status.

"My king, a few of the copper miners have been injured in an accident, and we cannot find the right doctors to treat them. They had been feeling sick, as well, though the local herbalist did not understand the cause."

Knitting her brows, Hayadusta chimed in. "What symptoms are we looking at?"

"Constant headaches, dizziness is a common problem, some vomiting, and other... unsavory conditions. I am sorry for my vulgarity, my lady."

"No worries. How many of the miners are experiencing this?"

"Honestly, a rather large number. We have over a hundred working there with nearly half showing signs of at least slight ailment."

"Too much exposure to the copper dust," she mumbled. As a princess, she had encountered a similar problem before. There were three principal copper mines in Hayara right now, and another five for tin. Tin mining was even more dangerous, she knew. She wondered if they were compensated well enough, considering the problems they were facing now. Both copper and tin were required to create the bronze they needed for most of their weaponry. There was also the ore used in the iron experiments. Bronze was good for everything, really, but iron had been proven by the Shum to be far superior and was well worth developing for Hayara. She smiled to herself, proud that she remembered the information gleaned from the blacksmiths and traders during her latest forays out of the castle. She would have to discuss this with her husband in the coming days, before the council meetings.

"Copper dust? Yes! That could certainly be it. There were also seven miners injured from a fall. The specifics are being investigated. Three broken legs and I assume most suffered a broken rib or two."

Nodding, she made a mental note to organize the doctors in charge of the mines better. "There was a landslide in the tin mines last moon span as well, correct?"

"Yes, my lady. Unfortunately, we lost three of our men during that incident."

Narrowing her eyes, Hayadusta began to pace. "We need to create safety measures for all of them. It is unfair to have our people work in conditions that could cause grave illness or even death. Compensation alone would not be enough, I believe. How would we be able to look their families in the eye afterward?"

Unaware that the king was thoroughly intrigued by his wife's movements, her strength of voice, and moved by her words, it

startled her when Arameni suddenly spoke up with royal bearing. "We need to help determine areas where landslides might occur, to protect the tin miners. We also need to create masks to protect the copper miners, as well as allow for multiple days of rest. They are not enslaved rebels. These are the sons of Ar and, as my wife so eloquently put, we would be remiss not to take all available measures to ensure their safety. That includes problems brought on by bad weather."

Smiling at the responses received, Aris bowed his head. "I will see to the masks made to prevent toxic dust inhalation, as well as to ensure each miner is given at least four days' rest every moon span. No working during extreme weather, either. It might slow down the process, and that might mean we need new miners."

"Do we have enough of a population for new miners to be brought in?" Hayadusta was also wondering about possible hunger and the lack of laborers in the home. "I believe we need to train farmers to create more food to help feed the families with miner husbands, fathers and sons. Is that not correct, my king?"

Arameni was quick to agree, just as Hayadusta expected.

"Aris, you may enlist Arodi in strategizing for a stronger Hayara. I believe between the two of you, we should not have any problems for many summers to come." A quirk to one edge of his lips, his eyes twinkled. "We shall be known as the richest faction in the world." There was pride in his voice, his back straight, feet set apart and chin held high, a noble aura emanating from him. Hayadusta was entranced.

"Of course, my king! I will approach Arodi with these issues shortly. The country's prosperity is of paramount importance."

"Very well, Aris, you are dismissed."

Before he could step out, Hayadusta called him back. "Contact Hayasuna. When the men are otherwise indisposed, she could be of incredible help. She is one of my younger priestesses, but with a strong healing hand."

Bowing, Aris hurried out to find the servant of Haya.

Sighing as the heavy door closed before them, Arameni pulled his wife into a warm embrace. "You, *hokis*, are the perfect wife."

"The perfect queen, you mean," she teased.

"*Amenalav takuhin*." He smiled as she blushed. In the ancient language, he had called her the best of the best in the realm of queens. "All of Hayara would certainly agree with that claim."

Laughing at the glint in his eyes, Hayadusta pulled back, entwining her fingers in his. Her robe offered him an exceptionally erotic view, and she decided it was high time she put her embarrassment aside. Suddenly remembering the jar of honey near the bed, she grabbed at his hand, a saucy shake to her hips as they approached her bed.

"I believe none would miss us until the sun is high in the sky. Perhaps we can spend a little while... talking?"

Swiftly swept off her feet, the queen melted into a searing kiss, lips slanted over hers in deepening passion, cheeks flushed with happiness. She could not wait to tell him the news... or perhaps she could?



As Ar's light illuminated each nook and cranny of the castle, the royal couple finally decided to make an appearance in court. It was well known that the duo would rarely leave their chambers before noontide, receiving only Aris and Arodi before finally making their way toward the great hall.

"Arameni, wait for a moment."

Quirking a brow at her sudden halt, his gaze fell to her red pout. "Yes, *kaghtsr*?"

"Your sweet? I adore your endearments, my love. Let us take a walk in the gardens first. I could do with the fresh air."

"Hayadusta, we have work to get to. I certainly have multiple meetings to attend. You need to check in with the priestesses about the preparations for the arrival of the Msran dignitaries."

"Yes, yes, Husband. I have everything under control. However, there is something I would like to share first."

Sighing, he pecked his wife. "You promise it cannot wait?"

"Yes."

"Why not tell me now?"

"The gardens are more pleasant."

Brows rose high on his forehead as he muttered to himself.

"All right, lead the way. However, we do not have much time."

Smiling brightly, Hayadusta placed her head against his arm and hugged him close. "Of course, my king."

After giving her a quick kiss atop her head, the two strolled out appearing as royals should in the eyes of outsiders: prim and proper. After all, appearances were everything at court. He walked with a confident stride, she with hands clasped and quick steps to match the king's pace.

Arriving in the gardens that were so beautifully tended to, with flora brought in as gifts from leaders of different factions, her hands found their way around his arm once more, a royal couple linked perfectly in a seemingly perfect world. The snapdragons were tall and beautiful and the rows of lilies, each of a distinct color, never ceased to entrance the queen. She was especially fond of the poppy fields. Today, however, there was something more important. She was bursting with excitement and Arameni found himself wondering about her sudden flush.

"Would you like to tell me what you have on your mind, my love?"

Moving toward the pond full of koi and lily pads from the lands of Xin, Hayadusta turned to her husband with a smile so brilliant, it was as if she were made of spun gold in that moment.

As serene and ethereal as the day he met her, she moved her gaze up to the heavens before pinning him with a look so joyful, he wondered if she had gone mad.

"We are blessed."

"We have been blessed from the day we met, my queen. I highly doubt you planned on stating the obvious." Annoyance had begun to creep into his words, despite his amusement; her mysterious actions and the quick passage of time made for a frustrating combination when there was much to be done. He did not understand her reasons to dawdle. His queen had been an outright and honest person to date, and secrets were never kept from him. At least he hoped that was the case. He wondered if he should question his unwavering trust, after all.

"Arameni, you are an impatient man," she grinned. It appeared the little nymph was enjoying his testiness, much to his chagrin. "I know the gods continue to bless us."

"Ar, give me strength," he mumbled before deciding his silence would bring out the words she was hesitating to speak. He knew she was toying with him. How long this would go on for, however, he had no idea, but at least she was not one to shirk duty. She had to spill her thoughts eventually.

Tilting her head, Hayadusta bit her tongue and sighed dramatically, the merriment adding sparkle to her eyes. Eventually, he thought to himself again.

"All right, I shall cut to the chase."

"Thank the gods..."

Giggling at her little charade, she spun around and decided the pond was not so ideal after all. Pulling a groaning Arameni after her, she finally stopped in the middle of the apple tree grove they had so painstakingly worked on. "I have a confession."

"A confession?" He hedged the question, not sure he wanted to know what all this was about anymore. She did not seem the type to present a true confession of wrongdoing in such a convoluted

manner. Also, when she spoke such words, he found he had a mess to clean up afterward. The soiled linens due to a dye experiment a few days back had certainly not been a pleasant sight to return to after his foray into the villages. Nor were the complaints that came soon after her arrival when she had ordered potted flowers to be placed on all the windowsills. She still threw a fit about that one, believing it added charm to the palace. He would go mad if she had another scheme for him to address so soon after the fiasco with the cooks. Then again, there was something in her eyes, one which said he would like this one. Struck with a sudden theory, he stood his ground, the scowl never leaving his lips.

"Yes, my darling king. Shall I tell you?"

"I highly doubt you can hide it for long, my love," he responded, unable to keep the scowl from turning into a slight smile. He was almost certain he knew what she would say.

"I am not having an affair, if the thought crossed your mind."

It had not, but he silently thanked her for putting that particular worry to rest. "I did not assume you were. No one would dare it."

Knitting her brows in feigned hurt, she lightly swatted at his chest. "Am I not beautiful enough?"

"My lovely wife, even Ar is drawn to your beauty. Have you not felt it?"

"You sweet master of compliments!"

"I do eat honey for breakfast with my cheese and bread," he grinned.

"How silly you are. I will not tell you now."

"No?"

"No."

"Then I shall be on my way, my little kitten."

"Kitten?"

As he began to walk away, upon untangling himself from her

grasp, his grin deepened without sparing her a glance. "Yes, you are as playful as a kitten. Perhaps I will bring you one soon, as a gift."

"You need not trouble yourself if you believe it would only be a pleasant distraction."

"No?" Here he did turn around. She loved cats. She especially liked the white balls of fur with the mismatched eyes near that lake he had brought her to when they could steal some time to themselves.

"Arameni, I do not need a kitten, for I will have another distraction to play with soon."

His theory had been correct! Lowering his gaze to the still smooth abdomen, he looked at his wife wonderingly. "I will be a father," he whispered.

"While I would have loved to tease you a little more, I will finally confess. Yes! I am to be a mother, you a father. Hayara will have an heir!"

Snapping out of his reverie, where suddenly the laughter of a child joined that of his parents, Arameni's cry of happiness scared man and bird alike in the vicinity. As a few of his closest guards ran to their king's side, they were greeted with a sweetly poignant image. With smiles as bright as the noontime sun plastered over their faces, the king's embrace had pulled the queen off the ground, and he spun her with pure delight. Giddiness overtook them both, and the men who watched seemed unable to move, slack-jawed and mesmerized. Even Arodi, who had arrived at a swift trot with a stoic expression and his hand on the hilt of his ornate sword, grinned like a fool. It quickly became clear exactly what all the fuss was about.

"A feast! We shall have a feast!" Shouting orders to his attendants, he had the news delivered to the head priestess. She would surely have known already, but it would be best the woman begin preparing this celebration with relative haste.

Laughing at the expressions of those around her, Hayadusta stepped back to smile at her husband.

"We will have a son before the start of the next summer season, I believe."

"So long?"

"Silliness does not suit you, King."

Her happiness radiated. Taking a closer look at her features, he mused to himself—so that was the new glow he had noticed. From what he remembered of their time together, no other symptoms had appeared yet. Though, he was far from learned in these matters himself.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course! A woman knows these things. Her body makes it clear," she winked, earning a blush high on his cheeks. He was not sure how to respond, instead opting to pat her on the head, over her silver-coined headdress and fixing her veil for a more proper image.

"As you say, my sweet. I am quite excited to see my son. Or perhaps Haya wants us to have a daughter?"

"You would welcome her?"

"Of course! Especially if a daughter would be as beautiful and headstrong, intelligent and, dare I say, mischievous, as her mother." He laughed, smothering her in little kisses.

She loved him. He had not thought she could, wondered if her initial passionate reaction was merely an expression of her longing for a man in her life. Perhaps it was the pent-up lust that had never found expression before it was finally set free from its cage constructed by society. However, over time, it became clear that she had honestly come to love him. The thought itself was enough to seize his breath and send him into thankful prayer. He had not planned to take a wife. Not yet, anyhow. She had been a whim, a fancy he had given into, as the wind had whispered in his ear to

gallop forward and steal this precious flower. After multiple moon spans of wedded bliss, it was impossible to imagine a life without her. Watching the flush in her cheeks and the twirling motions she made before him, he was caught off guard when she mouthed words of love. Again. So engrossed was he in the scene before him that even he startled as he swooped in for a kiss, uncaring whether they were the spectacle of the court about which the people would gossip with such enthusiasm. Even he would laugh at the retelling of the tales.

"*Sirum em kez*," he exclaimed over and over again. I love you.



Across the nation, in their little pocket of the world, Hayli had woken feeling tired and disgruntled. Upon hearing the possible diagnosis of the herbalists, her eyes had shone with excitement, propelling her body into the arms of her husband, thanking Ar and Haya and whatever other forces might exist in the heavens for the joyous news. She would get through this pregnancy without complaint and prayed the child would be born healthy and on time. While fears still gnawed at her mind, the beauty of her love mixed with her husband's was enough to triumph over any negative energy. They would get through this, she vowed. Moreover, they would come out stronger in the end.

"*Sirum em kez*," he told her repeatedly. She responded to his words with pleasure and in kind.

"*Sirum em kez*."

There was something so very sweet in the night. It was as if the gods smiled down with joy, basking in the happiness of their favorites. They should not pick and choose from among their children, of course, but sometimes it was impossible not to. Even the gods favored one over another.

Unfortunately, not every story of love and pregnancy was to end

with happy childbirth. A heavy foreboding nagged at Hayli's subconscious incessantly, once again destined to become the determinant in the deterioration of their peaceful romance.

Chapter Sixteen

Family Reunited



With her pregnancy now quite apparent, the days of fatigue and almost unbearable back pain had brought nothing but joy to Hayli. Her love had illuminated through the darkness plaguing her mind to her family's great relief. Looking up at the clear blue sky now that the bitter cold season had passed brought a smile to her lips. Between the plush furs on their floor, the fire in their hearth, and the nights with her husband and child nestled close, the past multiple moon spans had been more than bearable. They were just perfect, despite the devastation to their fields caused by the frost. Closing her eyes, she smiled. All was serene.

Approaching his wife for an embrace, Arme bit the shell of her ear while hands clasped around her waist. She shivered instinctively, marveling at how beautifully their physical connection had blossomed anew, despite the rocky beginning.

"The day is wonderful," she spoke wistfully, melting into his arms.

"Yes. It most certainly is, my love."

"Almost there, *hokyag*. The midwife agrees that within the next two moon spans, we should see our baby's birth. Finally!"

"Your excitement is enough to make my heart soar, *siruns*. My beauty." Arme was glad they had finally come to terms with everything. He was sure there would be many obstacles ahead, but he could never have imagined Haya blessing them with a newborn. It was almost too perfect to be true. Hayisi had made it clear he could never sire a child again. Yet, here he was, with the swollen belly of his wife in his hands, tracing circles reverently while feeling the babe's strong kicks. It was a miracle. He could only feel thankful for this blessing.

Nuzzling back into her husband's arms, she soaked in the calm and the love of the moment.

"You will have to leave soon?"

"Yes, my sweet. Are you truly all right with this?"

"I have no choice; or do I?" Her smile was gentle. He was glad she accepted him and the situation in which they were placed. She even teased him about the gold in his eyes and sent him out to hunt without her initial tantrums. He usually drank from the game before bringing the carcasses home for a special dinner. Aran was not privy to all the details, but the adoration in his son's eyes was back. At least for his family, Arme was no longer a beast.

"You always have a choice, my sweet. I, on the other hand, rarely do," Arme mumbled against her ear. He did not want to leave her like this, and he had made it clear to her time and again. Especially not with the baby so close. It was unfortunate for them that the elder priestess had come calling with news, which did not sit well with Hayli. It had been over a fortnight since she had appeared in the flesh, a sight that still drove his heartbeat into a frenzy considering the fact that she had been dead for a good three days before her divine resurrection, and his wife was quite clearly unsettled by the words the messenger of Haya had spoken.

"Arme, what happened with the priestess, Hayisi?"

"You refer to her handicaps?"

Nodding silently, she watched her husband's expressions with

great interest.

Sighing, he lifted his gaze to where the outline of the moon was clear across the horizon from the sun. "Somehow, I am responsible for both her blindness and her death, or undeath, as it seems. In her own words, it is because she taps into powers far beyond the human body's abilities. Strange enough, Haya did not wish to take her soul the night of my rebirth. She came almost as an apparition while the goddess suddenly possessed her granddaughter."

Hearing her sharp intake of breath, Arme held her tighter as she whispered. "The goddess truly spoke through the child?"

"Yes, and it was beyond anything you could imagine. I still wonder if it was a dream. Haya's presence seemed to bring Hayisi back to life. I swear by the gods, the priestess was dead in my arms. Naked limbs lying there, perfect and broken, and so very cold," he shuddered. The memory was as frightening as the moment had been. His insides roiled at the thought, and there was a tremble to his legs. Hayisi had been dead, he repeated. He knew she had been, for his mind and all his senses had confirmed it. Hayimi had undoubtedly confirmed it, he reminded himself. And then... the goddess. Haya had spoken through the child. The thought still knocked the breath from his body. Who was he to bring a goddess into this world?

"What did she say?" Hayli's voice was full of wonder, and he knew she struggled to imagine such a thing occurring. She struggled with the thought that her husband was more than just human, with a destiny beyond the scope of humanity. He could not expect her to grasp the magnitude of a deity's manifestation. He had trouble with it as well if he were to be frank with himself.

"It is almost hard to remember." In truth, his memory was quite muddled. He only knew she had soothed his soul when fear of the unknown and guilt shredded his dignity. He had desired to serve her, seeing beyond the child's body; it was as if the light of the moon herself was suddenly before him, arms beckoning him close. "There was love when I looked at her; so much love was present in that cave on that night. I wonder if such is how we feel once we arrive

in the realm of the gods after our deaths. Hayli, it was as if I was staring into a ball of light with a woman's aura. Was it even a woman? I do not know. Haya was so much more than what we imagine the gods to be. It was incredible, impossible, and utterly incomprehensible. I felt faint. Perhaps I did blackout at some point. I don't even know anymore. However, she made it clear this was my path, one she had drawn for me. I have never seen a vision quite like it, but that night, Hayli... that night made me pray like never before. I am often afraid you are an illusion; that everything is an illusion, and the fires will soon swallow me whole. I know this does not make much sense. I apologize for rambling on."

Shivering in his arms, it seemed as if she tried to imagine her husband's terror, his awe and doubt, and, finally, his utter and complete belief in the goddess who was but a tale to them before her physical manifestation. "I believe you. It is too improbable not to be the truth."

"You always did have a twisted way of understanding things, my love," he laughed, fingers entwined with hers.

"And yet you love me still," she responded impishly.

"Always."

"Forever? Even if we die and are reborn?"

Squeezing her close, he allowed her emotions to wash over him. "No matter how many times we come back. If we never do, then I will love you in the heavens as we serve the goddess for an eternity."

"Ever the charmer," she smiled as she leaned in for a kiss. "For as long as our souls exist, I will be with you. No matter where we end up."

"Yes, *hokuyag*. Forever."

For a few moments, they basked in the peaceful silence, relishing the feel of their bodies pressed so close.

Finally, Hayli broke the silence. "When do you expect to leave?"

"By the half-moon, my love," he responded sadly. Not wanting to leave his family again so soon, he had hoped to ignore the summons. The gods had granted him over two seasons with those he loved most, however, and he should be grateful. Hopefully, he would be able to come for the birth of the child. The midwife was aware of his travels and had promised to visit regularly. Aran was also warned to immediately contact the herbalist and midwife once the pains began or the water emptied from her womb. The boy could be relied on to care for his mother. Villagers who were told to help themselves to Arme's wild apples and quince also tended to the gardens. Friends would care for their animals in the village. No matter how meticulously he had arranged for his family and home care, Arme was still apprehensive.

"I will try to be back as soon as possible, my Hayli."

"I know, Arme. I trust you. Only Haya and Ar know exactly what difficulties you will face there. Arameni believes you are dead, lost to the world. I made sure his messengers understood why I cremated you without allowing him to share in my grief. Do you think he would forgive us such deception?"

"I do not know. None at court would know me. Few even know of my existence, save for Arameni and several nobles. My father ensured to erase me from memory. Hayisi has kept me updated about the happenings at court, of course, and through this, I have become privy to much information. So long as he does not reveal the truth about the creature before him once I reveal myself for what I am, I shall be safe enough. You know what I was created for, however. He is a clever man and an opportunistic king. It is no wonder trade has grown so immensely. Most of the bronze weapons can only be bought through court-sanctioned vendors and, between the increase in textile production, pottery, and even iron creations, the royal coffers have already filled up considerably. Did you know about the large rock found crashed in one of the valleys? They say it contains some incredible ore. A traveling merchant told me all about it, so I am quite excited to see it for myself, if I manage to. Furthermore, Hayisi mentioned the queen has been instrumental in much of Hayara's successes. I look

forward to meeting her."

"You are proud of him; of them, together." Hayli pulled her husband indoors after finding her son skinning some fish just outside the entrance and giving him a quick kiss. The sun had begun to set, and a brisk wind had picked up. He had no intention of allowing them to catch a cold, so he nodded for his son to join them as soon as he was done and quickly followed her in.

"Yes, I suppose I am. It is hard not to be."

"Is the queen truly so good in politics?"

"Yes, I hear she attends many of the diplomatic meetings herself. The country's social affairs are run mainly by her. Arameni is in charge of the army, and most of the foreign policy."

"Queen Hayadusta, uniter of the Arani and the Harrani. Overseer of the country's internal politics. I would love to make her acquaintance someday soon as well," Hayli spoke, voice tinged with awe and perhaps a little envy.

Arme smiled and pulled his wife closer. Aran came in with the fish at that moment and set up the fire. Though the boy seemed engrossed in his tasks, Arme knew he was listening closely.

"Father, how long will you be leaving us for?"

"I cannot say, my son. I hope I will be back in time for the birth of the babe. A sister or brother for you!"

Tilting his head curiously, Aran stared at his mother's now heavily protruding belly. "Sister or brother? When will we know?"

"When he or she comes into this world," Arme laughed, enjoying the boy's perplexed expression.

"I'm too impatient!"

Hayli's laughter joined Arme's as they pulled their son close. "As are we," she kissed him. "As are we."



Riding hard toward the castle of stone his father had commissioned long before his birth, Arme tried to suppress the rising nostalgia which threatened to swallow him whole. His mother had been here, his mind cried out. His mother was now dead, as per Hayisi's words, having barely lived long enough to enjoy the blessings her station allowed. Summers of guilt and self-loathing threatened to drown him once again, lungs constricted and breathing suddenly shallow.

Gulping in as much air as possible, Arme forced his body to calm down. His father was to blame, not the prince born so dark the royal family had him declared a bastard. The gods were to blame, not the man they had turned into beast. Swallowing his pain as the castle loomed before him, the noise of the settlement within buzzed steadily louder in his ears; Arme kicked his steed once more and pushed toward the gates. Arameni was his brother, he repeated in his mind. The king had to accept him. With Ar's assistance, the exiled family would soon be allowed back home.

Nearing the stone wall, Arme was surprised to see masons hard at work, carving into the material so masterfully, images of immense beauty emerged. It appeared to be market day, with merchants bustling about from all over, foreigners presenting exotic goods and joining in the day's merriments. Spying some silk just within the walls, he made a mental note to grab a few gifts for Hayli. She had been feeling quite unattractive the past fortnight, demanding compliments, and wailing about her bloated body more often than not. The least he could do was help boost her pride a little with a few trinkets.

Trotting to the inner gates, he nodded to the guard. Hayisi had promised easy access to court. The guards eyed him warily but did not seem wholly unaffected by his air of importance.

"You have business at court or with the merchants?"

"At court."

"The king is aware of your arrival?"

"Yes, the priestesses should have warned him."

"Which priestesses?"

"Haya's Elder, Hayisi, and her apprentice, Hayimi."

"Your code?"

Dropping his voice to the necessary whisper, he paused before stating it. "Rising Phoenix."

The hardened gaze of the largest of the three traveled over him. Arme wondered if he would need more convincing. He was not in the habit of resorting to violence and hoped the day would not lead to any added unpleasantness.

"You are not local."

"In a manner of speaking."

"That is very vague, Sir. The High Priestesses of Haya are not well known. How did you encounter them?"

"I grow weary of this conversation. If you wish to know, ask the priestesses. It is not my place to reveal such things. Now, I was promised access and an audience with the king. I have given you the correct code to pass. I would kindly request you allow me to be on my way."

Nodding their heads and moving aside, the guards bade him a good day.

The capital, Aratta, was incredibly beautiful. It was clear the queen loved cleanliness, for there was little in terms of debris around the courtyard. There were gardens linked by pebbled and dirt roads which were so well packed, it was impossible to even call them out for being earth. Head held high, he rode to the royal house, the large stone building where the court resided year-round. He knew the colder moon spans would drive them into underground dwellings. Since this part of their region was warmer

than usual, the people and the royals were able to spend a good amount of time above ground before fearing the frost. He never could understand the deep freeze they experienced before and after the onset of summer. The Chari season was a mystery. Perhaps the gods wished to punish them in intervals for any wrongdoings perceived throughout the time of Ari?

Allowing his musings to take over, Arme tuned out the stares of those around him. He had forgotten to pull up the hood of his fur covering, exposing his curling dark hair to these fair men and fairer maidens. He was sure many had noticed the gleaming gold of his eyes as well. Hayli had mentioned the brown had been nearly swallowed by the gold now, though it would recede to small flecks often enough before flaring once again. It was a wonder she had not run screaming in terror at the sight.

Training his eyes on the guards at the tall wooden doors, once again in the process of an ornate carving, Arme awaited acknowledgment.

"You have business with the king, we presume," the oldest of the five spoke up.

"Yes, I am expected."

"Who has brought your summons?"

"High Priestess Hayisi."

The younger guards mumbled among themselves. They had heard about a human weapon and the whispers at court about Haya's blessing. They had not expected the man before them, however. The human mind always conjures something grander. Skeptical glances were on him as they wondered if perhaps he was not it, after all.

"Your code?"

"Rising Phoenix," he spoke boldly, the fire within him burning.

"The weapon?" The guard asked quietly. There was a need for utmost secrecy.

"Me," he whispered back. His voice was gruff, grating even to his ears.

One in particular looked ready to pass out. Scurrying out of Arme's way, they stood agape, eyes boring into the creature's muscular back as he passed by.

"I will show you the way," the elder guard spoke. He was a warrior. It was clear he was within the smaller rings of the political game played here from the tone of his voice and confidence in his stride. How close he might be to the king, Arme could not be sure. It mattered not. Quietly, the duo entered the inner courtyard where the groomsmen greeted them.

"Please dismount and we will walk the rest of the way on foot." Signaling to a young man standing nearby, the guard ensured the announcement of their arrival.

"Alright."

"My lord, the queen will also join you for this meeting. I wish to remind you of her delicate condition."

"You speak as if pregnancy is an illness, sir. I highly doubt the queen would appreciate that."

Taken aback, the guard inspected his dubious companion. "You do not think one should treat a woman with extra care in this condition?"

"It is hardly so terrible a 'condition' as to warrant more than basic courtesy. My wife is currently round with child as well," Arme replied with a raised brow.

Before the guard could speak, the young man returned and stood before Arme.

"You are Rising Phoenix?"

"So I have been told."

"You do not look so... bird-like." The youth smiled without malice.

"Truly? I was told I am an eagle," Arme shot back, golden beams dancing in his eyes.

"I am Aris, my lord. It is a pleasure."

Amused, Arme nodded his head at the boy's slight bow.

For his part, Aris had realized immediately who the man was. Now, he was sure there was more to this individual than met the eye. The priestess had remained mum about the man's background, but her status entitled her to such mysteries. He would have to consult with Arodi about this. The queen would also provide the insight necessary.

"What exactly have you been told about me, boy?"

"Only that the gods have sent a weapon worthy of protecting the nation of Hayara," Aris bowed again, refusing to say too much.

Walking into an immense room covered in obsidian set in gold, Arme found himself before the throne whence his father had once ruled. Instead of the white-bearded tyrant he had imagined throughout his lifespan, there stood a king not much older than he. Long golden waves were held back with a gold-embroidered red leather tie. Fiery gold wisps covered the man's chin and neck, shaped almost certainly by the jewel-hilted obsidian dagger at his waist. Beside the king's throne was a slightly smaller version for the queen where the beauty rested, one hand on her belly, the other daintily lain against the polished black of her seat.

It was the sudden booming of the king's voice that startled him out of his reverie.

"I have been given a prophecy, Guest. It spoke about a phoenix rising to protect the crown."

"I do not know which prophesy you have heard, Your Majesty."

Narrowed blue eyes appraised the man standing before him. "You do not kneel?"

Lowering his head slightly, Arme ensured his respect would be apparent without overly dramatic behavior. "It is not in my custom

to drop to my knees, Your Majesty."

"An interesting creature you are. I wonder if I should be insulted by your actions so early in our meeting. Would you not agree, my queen?"

Despite the sheen of grey, the blue-green of her gaze was so very warm compared to his brother's ice. Arme's own fell upon her, and he suddenly felt, more than heard, her gasp.

"Husband, I believe this is an audience best held alone."

Curious, Arameni looked over to his wife. His confusion dissolved quickly, however, and he acquiesced. "As you wish, *hokyag*."

Nodding, Hayadusta looked over to Aris, who understood his mistress's requirements. Turning to the guards within the room, he ushered them out, closing the heavy wooden doors behind him. Once they were alone, Hayadusta pinned Arme with her sharp scrutiny.

"You are not human."

"No, my queen," he answered humbly. He had not expected them to pick up on that little fact until later, if at all. It was disconcerting.

"Your eyes are a golden sheen. It is almost as if I look into the brilliance of Ar himself."

Startled, Arme looked closer at the woman sitting before him, her current state mirroring his own wife's. There was something almost otherworldly about her as well, but it was hard to pinpoint the reason.

"No need to stare, my friend. I believe you might be closer to the gods than I am at the moment."

Clearing his throat as he tried to follow this conversation, the king addressed Arme.

"What is your name, Phoenix?"

"You do not recognize me, my king?"

Confusion marred his features as Arameni scrutinized the dark man before him. Arme could imagine his brother's thought process, knowing he would be trying to connect them somehow but failing. He could have been a foreigner, of course, for he certainly did not resemble the typical Hayaran. The king believed him dead, he reminded himself, feeling a stab of pain. This was something the monarch had been assured of by the High Priestess and had confirmed through Hayli's crazy tales.

Anger emanated from Arameni, but Hayadusta remained quite calm in comparison.

"You are the one some refer to as the Dark Prince, am I correct?"

A sharp intake of breath was heard from both men in the room as their eyes snapped over to her. The king spoke first, haunted eyes moving to their strange guest as if willing him to disappear.

"Why would you bring up my brother now? He is dead! You heard that wretched wife of his! She had him cremated even before I could mourn my blood, a royal of this land!"

Calmly hearing out her husband's tirade, Hayadusta lightly touched the king's hand and laced their fingers before turning back to Arme. Her eyes were clear. Her countenance at the moment was so like that of his vision of Haya that it unhinged the *dakhanavar*. He finally dropped to one knee and properly showed the queen the respect she deserved. He had not expected this. Haya indeed worked through this woman, and he would ensure her favor. She would be his to protect in the days to come.

The change in attitude interested the king, who drummed his fingers against the armrest as he eagerly awaited his denial.

"Yes, my queen. You are correct."

"You have lied to your king, to your kin."

"Yes, my queen."

"That is punishable by death."

Smiling forlornly, Arme allowed the pain in his soul to shine through. His eyes took on a blood-gold color. His skin paled, the veins more prominent. The hair on his head lengthened, and should she have seen beneath his clothes, that which covered him would have appeared thicker. As for the mark on his arm, the royals would have become lost in the symbol's burnt gold appearance. Arameni was not ready for this and drew his dagger, moving before his wife.

"Husband, he will not harm me. I am positive of this."

"You do not know that. This impostor claims to be my brother!"

"I claim nothing, my king. Our parents are simply one and the same."

"You are not human. You said so yourself! If so, you cannot be my brother." The king's tone was menacing. He had mourned alone, both his mother's and brother's passing. Had not shown the world his pain. He could not. And yet, this thing before him dared open these wounds once more? The anger flowing with the king's blood was so hot, he was ready to explode. That very anger created a thirst within Arme, which left him reeling.

"Brother, please stop."

"Brother? How dare you! How do you even know about my brother?"

"Arameni, I am Arme," he pleaded, his vision red, knowing he could pass out from the intensity of the thirst within him. He needed love, gentleness, kindness. He needed his family.

Sinking lower on his knees, Arme hid his face as guards ran inside upon the king's roaring release of rage. Aris quickly assessed the situation, and upon seeing the royals unharmed—the man before them on his knees—decided it would be best to allow the king to deal with the situation on his own.

"Aris, please give us some more time alone," Hayadusta ordered quietly. Her calm was enough to spur him into action, once again pushing the guards out of the room.

Before he left, he spoke his thoughts. "The man is no ordinary human. I sense that life and death do not follow the same rules with this creature prostrate before you, Majesties. I can almost smell it in the air. Remember, there is good reason the elder priestess is involved."

Aris would wait until he had time alone with the queen to learn the details. The king would certainly not be as thorough. Most things with him were on a need-to-know basis, which could become quite tedious. Aris could not do his job well with the king's distrust getting in the way. Even Arodi did not know everything. At the moment, however, he complied and left the trio to their devices.

As the room cleared once more, Arameni strode forward and pulled the man before him up by the neck of his clothing. "What are you?"

"A beast."

"Beast?"

"Inhuman warrior, to be more exact."

"How?"

"The gods willed it so."

Annoyed with the short answers, he threw Arme to the ground.

"Pathetic. You will not glean any favor from me. My brother is gone; do not ever presume you can take his place."

Smiling, the *dakhanavar* felt his pain and thirst recede. "I am delighted you think as such, Brother. I thank you for your loyalty."

"What in Ar's name are you speaking about, you lout?"

Laughing to himself, Arme stood up. He allowed the illusion to shield him once again against the prying eyes of those less than himself. Somehow, his brother's lack of response to his beastly look and utter anger at the thought of impersonation was enough; Arme found himself finalizing his transformation into the *dakhanavar* he was meant to be. Those before him deserved his sacrifice and the allegiance he would swear. The distraction from the intensity of the

negative emotions within the king had also diminished the bloodlust to entirely manageable levels, for which the *dakhanavar* was overly thankful.

"King Arameni, brother by blood, brother by my choosing. You have always protected the bastard from the world, insisting on our mother's piety, on our father's lack of faith leading to my isolation. You have left my wife and child wanting for nothing. To date, I have not dared to venture to your side, instead, consoling myself with stolen glimpses of Your Majesty and news about your successes, your bravery, and your strengths."

When the king looked like he wished to say something, eyes open wide with disbelief, Arme continued. "Today, I come before you as a warrior, a guardian to the throne, to the king and the queen and the child you will bring into this world. I come as a weapon created by Haya herself, anointed by Ar. I come to offer my services and ensure you know I live. Not only live, but have been tasked with the protection of Hayara. I have traded mortality for an uncertain future, my life for a perpetual whirlwind of pain, of obstacles and constant battles, both within myself and the world around us. So long as I am required to keep my people safe, I will. That is my oath and my solemn declaration.

While he had looked at his brother squarely, standing tall with intensity flowing through him as he articulated his monologue, he now dropped before the king, one knee bent, two fingers to his heart. Their eyes never broke contact.

"You..."

"Yes. I am alive, Brother."

"How can I believe you?"

Smiling, Arme began to strip, removing his cloak and then the tunic covering his upper body. While the king's cheeks reddened with outrage, Hayadusta watched with a twinkle in her eye. Arme found her amusement intriguing.

"That mark!"

Having expected the gasps, the *dakhanavar* shrugged his shoulders. It was as if the swirls had come to life. He knew the effect they had, had watched the wonder in Hayli's features as she traced the golden ash lines, mesmerized by the fiery scar.

"Arme..."

"Yes, my king."

Choking back a sob, Arameni stared long into eyes of gold, moistened by emotion.

"Red tears?"

"I am no longer human, my king."

"How?"

"I was given a choice. Give up my earthly life and save my nation or go on living long enough to see it end."

The king frowned at his words. Arme imagined he could not be happy to hear about threats against his rule. "You gave everything up?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"A prophecy which foretold Hayara would fall without my direct support. Where you and the queen were lost to us, mere whispers on the wind for the generations to come to forget."

"You gave up everything you knew, for a prophecy?" Incredulous, Arameni placed firm hands on the shoulders of a brother he had only known in his heart, met only once years before. "You gave up everything for me?"

"Yes, my king," Arme smiled.

Behind them, Hayadusta smiled as she felt the spirit of Haya with them. The goddess seemed pleased with the day's events. Placing her fingers against the belly that housed the future of their nation, the queen whispered her gratitude for all the goddess had done.

The men, oblivious to the queen's prayers, appraised one another before the king spread his arms. "Please tell me you are not hiding anything else, Brother? I believe the fact that you have lied will earn you a thorough punishment!"

Laughing, Arme embraced his brother happily. It was a bittersweet moment, yes, but one that lit up his heart. Finally, face to face with his blood and kin, accepted as he was, Arme reeled with emotion.

"My king, what would I keep from you?"

"Anything! If you can keep such a large secret, I can only fathom what else you have failed to disclose. Tell me what I do not know," he demanded in good nature, grinning foolishly.

Thinking for a moment, Arme smiled impishly.

"I was the one who beat your wedding drum?" This confession earned gasps from both king and queen. They had not considered the gods using Arme for this special blessing. It alleviated the guilt of not having the full family present during the festivities.

"That explains much," Hayadusta tittered from behind them. Arameni could not help giving into the utter joy which seemed to engulf all three.

"Is that all, my utterly insane creature of a brother?"

Grinning back at the king, Arme decided to share something more personal. The lighter mood had fully extinguished his thirst, and he both felt and looked human. It was what he had needed from the start, he realized. A homecoming fit for a prince.

"Hayli is finally with child again!"

Chapter Seventeen

Oath



Many heard the queen's squeal of glee.

"My queen?" All shared in Arameni's shock at such a sound, wondering at the queen's sanity.

Laughing just as loud, Hayadusta stood up surprisingly gracefully. Her eyes crinkled, a smile splitting high as she glowed with excitement.

"Husband, it is a special day. This calls for a celebration!"

"My love, I highly doubt we should announce to the world that my brother is indeed alive," he whispered in her ear, stamping down on her sudden outburst. "Nor can we tell the world exactly what he is."

Mellowing ever so slightly, the queen pecked her husband on the cheek, her eyes alight with that signature mischief.

"*Hokis*, it is as if you do not know me sometimes." Grinning, she clapped. "We shall simply tell everyone that the queen's pregnancy is reason enough for constant celebration."

"Sometimes, you are too much. Of course. How can anyone refuse you, my sweet?"

"You speak in the old language, as well?" Arme looked at the queen in confusion at the use of the endearment.

"A few words. The Arorti taught me, and then I taught my lovely Hayadusta," smiled Arameni. "But how do you know the words?"

Looking sheepish, Arme smiled. "I spent some time reading, particularly at the priestess's library. It was... enlightening."

The moment was so ordinary and yet so very extraordinary. The trio could not help the wash of relief. Now, they were a family in every aspect of the word. His brother openly accepted Arme, and his queen was indeed a wonder to behold. For a *dakhanavar*, he could not have been happier. The gods had not forsaken him, after all.

"Come." Hayadusta moved forward, linking an arm through her new brother's. "I shall have Aris show you to your rooms. There will be time enough for discussions once we have enjoyed some of the delectable meals our new cooks can conjure. They truly are the miracle workers around here. The herb gardens are nearly overflowing, meaning we shall have some pretty interesting starters with our lamb!"



After the feast, where a very pregnant Hayadusta joined the court in some rather lively dancing, Arme was heading back to his chambers to rest when he noticed an almost unfriendly aura. His mind screamed danger just as he saw a young man slip in and out of different doors, not seeming particularly lost.

"You there, boy. Which room are you looking for?"

Caught, the youth tried his best not to stutter. "I seem to have drunk too much. I cannot find my room."

"You seem sober enough to me," Arme shot back with narrowed eyes.

"I'm steady on my feet, sir. I apologize for startling you."

"No, I think you are not drunk at all," Arme tilted his head. The trepidation was clear as day on the stranger's face and, although he was not familiar with most in the castle, nearly everything screamed foreigner about the boy.

"Are you a dignitary from a nearby state?"

"N-No, sir. I am Hayaran."

Scoffing, Arme scrutinized the boy's features, locking every detail to memory. Certainly not local. "You are from the south."

"What?" Taken aback, the stranger looked like prey in a hunt. Eyes wide, he kept searching for an escape route.

"Why are you lying to me?"

"I'm not!"

"You are." Glowing gold gazed at a soft dark honey green as Arme towered over the boy. "Why are you here?"

"I live here," was the trembling response.

"Why do I feel there is more to your story than you are admitting to?"

"My lord, I just want to find my room." The flustered youth tried to compose himself and get away. Arme was not about to let up, but he sighed and offered the boy a hand anyhow.

"I'll help you then. Which wing have you been assigned a room in?"

Visibly trying to steel himself, he mumbled something before bowing and running away. Despite his mind's urging, Arme let the incident pass. He would have to ask around, though. There was no doubt about it. The lad was the furthest thing from Arani or Harrani blood. His features were quite distinct to a tribe he had met many summers back when he had decided to see the world for himself. A tribe he had believed mostly annihilated by nomadic forces. Perhaps the mysterious stranger was a refugee? If so, why lie?



Kaydeh had become a trembling mess. While the initial plan had been to scope out the territory before entering the king's court, he was drawn to the sweet tastes and unbridled laughter that permeated this rather large settlement. The surrounding villages had seemed quite well off as well, with many a stranger inviting him over for breakfast, dinner, or just a snack for the road when he had been in a hurry. Bread, cheese, wine, and a whole lot of pork; he could not have enough of it. The quince was especially appetizing, though he enjoyed the sweet wild apples found throughout the region most. He had also come across some interesting berries near a large lake, where the fruit grew in abundance on large patches of greener land. The villagers taught him how to gather the orange delicacies from the prickly bushes that ended up scratching him severely. Needless to say, he found himself in constant need of the pungent ointment the people were so fond of. Brewing these fruits brought about a sweet taste, though, that could preemptively cure any illness he might have succumbed to on his journey. The kindness and hospitality of those who lived within the borders of Hayara were in such sharp contrast to the life he had become accustomed to that it was all he could do to keep the weeping at bay. He wondered if they would ever forgive him for the deceptive role he played.

"I do not know if I can go through with this, Commander." He whispered to himself while shuffling across the dirt roads, repeatedly.

The close encounter with that hulking, dark creature earlier had shaken him. While his resolve had been wavering, having such a fiend discover his true intentions frightened him fiercely. Who was that man and what could he want? There had been rumors the past few days of a powerful individual entering the stronghold, but Kaydeh had been unable to glean much information, try as he might. The generals were mum about it, while the soldiers knew as

much as he. The overall population within the walls did not particularly care, but there was talk of a foreigner meeting with the king. As dark as night, they kept whispering, with an ashen image that glowed on his muscular arm. Some said he was not human, though most anyone would have scoffed at the idea. It was preposterous. These people did not have multiple gods like his own did, nor were they fond of weaving extravagant legends. At least not yet. Kaydeh had come to understand that legends were born from the heroics of the few when the days were dire and a savior necessary to keep that spark of hope alive. Perhaps these people lived in too much comfort? The most beautiful tales are born from the extreme pain of the human soul. It really would be a shame to destroy this peace and harmony, though. People were so happy here. It was almost despicable.

Once again, he cursed Kimbaru for his insatiable bloodlust. "Hopefully we will be able to recreate this prosperity when he is king..."

Finding his way back to the servants' quarters where he had found a homely maid to take up lodging with, Kaydeh tried to block out all the kindness he had been exposed to. Kimbaru was the one to whom he had pledged his loyalty. A pledge is for a lifetime, with honor found in death protecting one's leader. The rest did not matter to him. He should glean all he could before returning to his master. In the meantime, the birds were proving quite handy. Shaking his head, he walked with shoulders back, chin high, and a blackening heart. When the gods refused to answer, he had only his principles to stick to, despite his growing affection for the local populace.



Over the next few days, Arme caught glimpses of the fibbing stranger as he explored the premises and became better acquainted with the politics of court. He was careful not to be seen too much with the king and queen, lest he draw added attention to himself.

For all anyone knew, he was a foreign dignitary on a secret mission. There were whispers about him, of course, but none knew his exact appearance and he had been picking up tips on proper disguise. The king found no reason to divulge any information either, further adding to the flurry of rumors that flew about quicker than a speeding stallion. Missing his wife and child, he preferred to avoid human interaction. Few knew about his ancestry, yes, but with the amount of information traded in this place day in and day out, it was a wonder he and his family had not yet been found out. Though he shied away from interacting with the local personnel, his heightened senses and supernatural abilities allowed for early detection of potential problems, and while it was clear that nearly everyone here was loyal to the crown, it never paid to let down one's guard. The near-total lack of aggression was staggering, he thought. A court without intrigue was a dull place indeed.

Of course, he had no intention of ever allowing anything to happen to his brother or the queen, but he had at least hoped to help put an end to plots and capture potential treacherous souls. Maybe that was why the hawk-like features of the southern boy kept drawing his attention. Perhaps it had nothing at all to do with his premonitions, and everything to do with his utter boredom.

Mulling over the details he had gleaned as he walked through the market outside the castle in his soldiers' garb, headgear, and all, Arme caught another glimpse of unkempt sandy hair that was entirely out of place among the golden blond around him. Inching closer for a better position to eavesdrop from, Arme was surprised at the ease with which he was able to pick up the conversation, as if it took place before him and not over a block away.

"I hear those at court have been complaining about a lack of drama," he was making small talk, yet Arme silently wondered about the boy's sources, amused that his own thoughts were used as rumor mill currency. "Do you really believe the king has no enemies within these walls?"

"It appears so," the merchant commented, seemingly intrigued by the features of the nosy youth as well. "Say, where are you from,

boy? You have an interesting look to you. Are you married?"

"No."

"A fetching boy like you? I have a daughter if you'd like to meet her."

Annoyance etched his features. He did not seem especially happy to talk about his personal life. The sharpness of the lad's eyes was not lost on Arme, but within moments the stranger softened and laughed it off.

"I am an orphan, actually. Not sure where I was born or who it was that raised me initially. I wander from village to village, doing odd jobs, lodging with strangers, and trying to enjoy life. I peddle in information from the king's castle. You can see why any and all rumors you may have heard might be quite precious for me. Sometimes, this information buys me a meal, sometimes a warm bed. It is the best product to sell," he winked.

Snorting, Arme mumbled, "That and your body, it seems."

The women who passed by had all been drawn to those exotic looks. Honestly, he thought, anything outside your typical blue eyes and gold tresses would draw massive attention these days. Hayara had become too loose with its morals, Aratta in particular. Arme was not fond of this development. He was all for merry revelry, but the ways of the city folk were too base. Finery, entertainment, and the pleasures of the flesh. Shaking his head, he longed for home.

Watching the boy move around gathering information, Arme suddenly noticed something he had not thought to encounter here. That blade, he thought. What in Ar's name was the boy doing with such a weapon?

Engrossed in his memories of where he had first encountered the strangely humanoid symbol, the lunar-solar representation of a female in simple geometrics, he suddenly realized his prey had disappeared.

"Excuse me."

Whirling around, Arme found himself thrown off by the boy's stealthy approach.

"Good day, Soldier. Have you been following me?"

Keen intuition, he thought. Arme had been cautious, with his heightened senses allowing for better invisibility in the crowd, but perhaps he had not been careful enough. "Why would I be following you, boy?"

"I noticed a while back you are always around, near or far," he shrugged. There was a boldness to him today which had been absent when he had been caught sneaking about.

"I am a guard. You are a foreigner. I believe that should be answer enough." Arme decided to change tactics. He seemed too clever to be a mere orphan. His next words, however, were entirely unexpected.

"You are not quite human, are you?"

Taken aback, Arme peered closer into the boy's eyes. There was green and honey and brown in there. From the south, he thought. Perhaps even from along the coast. The boy was a mongrel, without a doubt. Those eyes were a rather intriguing shade. Scoffing at his adversary, Arme responded with a mocking tone. "You have been trading in too many rumors, it seems. Now the guard is inhuman, as well as the guest? Answer me. Who are you?"

"So, I am correct in assuming you are interested in me?"

"I find you to be an anomaly."

"I return the sentiment."

"What is your real name?"

"Araki."

"Lie."

"How can you be so sure?"

"You are from the south."

"You cannot know that."

"I can." Cocking his head to the side, Arme kept his gaze steady. No doubt about it, he was a child of Baal. The weapon was a dead giveaway.

Noticing the shifting of the boy's feet, Arme wondered whether he should encourage the fear he knew was coursing through the child or tap into the anger. Clenched fists and shifty eyes helped decide for him. Definitely the anger, he thought, as rage released the tongue as no other emotion could.

"What do you want with me?"

Narrowed eyes seemed alight with fire. Goosebumps appeared on the boy's body as he tried to withstand against a rather ominous glare.

"You are a trespasser."

"I am not!"

"No?"

Indignant, his adversary flared his nose. "I am local, but a mix."

"Lie."

"That is a rude presumption."

"Not if it's the truth."

Arme could see he had the desired effect. "Once again, what do you want with me?"

"I simply want your name, child of Baal."

"Baal?" Pale as snow, Kaydeh involuntarily stepped backward.

A small smirk on his face, Arme grabbed the boy's arm. "I was correct, then."

"N-No!"

"Yes," he responded with such a friendly grin. A stranger would assume he had found an old acquaintance. Kaydeh, however, was

shaking, the blood rushing through him bringing a hum to his ears. He had noticed the lack of blue in those irises. The darkness in his captor's eyes appeared deeper somehow, the gold more pronounced. He knew the situation had turned dire.

Cursing himself for believing the bolder move would scare off the stalker, he tried to calm himself long enough to come up with a plan. That this man knew he was a child of Baal was incomprehensible. It was impossible, he thought. In that moment, Kaydeh knew genuine fear. Not just for his life, either. This was not a man. This was a beast! Not a hulking giant, but not someone to mess around with either, from what he could tell. He would have to find a way to warn Kimbaru immediately!

"You know nothing!" Channeling his emotions into rage, Kaydeh tried to attack the man holding his hand so tight that he might soon break it. Raising a fist intended to connect with his captor's nose, a sharp pain suddenly appeared somewhere on his body. Too shocked to pinpoint where, Kaydeh found himself on the ground, curled up in a ball, with the beast towering over him. Had the boy not raised his fist first? Onlookers asked one another, perplexed, as they tried to understand the scene before them.

Knowing better than to antagonize a knight of the realm, they held their tongue against the assault. This was the royal guest the market had been abuzz about, Kaydeh realized too late. He was the dark-haired and fiery-eyed man who had discovered too much, too soon. He knew those around them would not see what he saw, instead finding themselves watching a guard holding onto a foreigner who had tried to physically harm him. Kaydeh could not count on them, for they would be confused or convinced he was in the wrong. As the crowd grew, the towering man suddenly raised his arm and time slowed to a near standstill. Before he could defend himself, the man had struck against his temple and knocked him out.

Throwing the Fonecian over his shoulder, Arme walked through the parting crowd, straight toward the castle. There was a sense of foreboding, and those around him were quick to scurry off the

moment they came in sight of the hulking man in guard's attire. This was a good thing, as he had no desire to explain his motives.

"Who are they?"

Whispers had already taken over the marketplace. Soon the entire region would be gossiping.

"Was that really one of the guards?"

"I heard the new guest at court has been walking around as a guard."

"Truly? Some say the gods blessed him!"

"I heard he is so strong, he can uproot a full tree!"

"Didn't you know? Demons raised him, but the gods took pity on him."

"No! You are all wrong! I heard he is a wizard who uses dark magic and the gods have turned on him."

"Why would the king allow for such a monster to walk around freely?"

The rumor mill had enough information to begin spinning the lies. So many opinions, so many rash words spoken. No one knew who or what he was, but they feared and maligned him anyhow. Arme had been brought up with thick skin, however, and words had little effect. At the moment, the only thing that mattered was figuring out who exactly this information-trading foreigner was.

Personally delivering the boy to the dungeon cells within the castle walls, the small body was thrown carelessly to the ground. Something was not right about this situation in Arme's eyes, and he would not rest until it became clear exactly what their enemies plotted.

"I heard you caused quite the scene out there." The voice came from behind him.

"My queen!" Snapping around, Arme quickly dropped to one knee.

"What have you found out there, Brother?"

Confused at her wording, Arme lifted his eyes from the ground, questioning their relationship. "Brother?"

"Are you not my brother through marriage and laws?" Giggling quietly, Hayadusta pulled him up to a standing position. "Do not worry; I do not plan on referring to you as such should we have guests around. The guards have moved out of earshot as I asked for some privacy."

"Of course, Your Majesty," Arme inclined his head and smiled. "I am glad to know you think of me as family."

"It would seem so," she beamed. "Now, who is this? He looks somewhat familiar."

"A spy, I think." Turning to face the unconscious youth, Arme scowled. "They always use the youngest for their dirtiest work."

"A spy? Intriguing." Peering closer, the queen took in the boy's features. "That nose is certainly not of the local sort. It is too hawk-like, too narrow. While Hayarans are well known for larger noses, they were of a different shape. Wider, more honest. I hate the thin ones. The hair could easily pass as local, but it still is a few shades too dark for comfort. Eyes?"

Understanding her line of questioning, Arme decided to describe them to her. Nodding her head, she agreed. "Southern, I reckon."

"A child of Baal, as I confirmed earlier."

"Baal! Why, in Haya's name, would a Fonecian come to Hayara? We have no animosity, of course, but no special trade agreements or anything to discuss either." Knitting her brows, she thought for a moment. "If I am not mistaken, his people were hunted by the rebel general, Kimbaru. I know of survivors finding sanctuary in neighboring lands, but never has one ventured so far north. It is most certainly disconcerting."

Thinking to himself, Arme tried to recall details about this

Kimbaru. It was a vague picture in his mind, but he knew almost as well as the queen about the general's conquests in the southern settlements.

"Yes, I believe that should be correct. Do you think there is a link?"

"Impossible to tell. Who has eyes set on Hayara? Despite the rumors, Kimbaru would have a tough time raiding our home, especially since an attack would at least decimate a sizeable portion of his army. The loots are just not worth it. In any case, we shall wait for him to wake before starting our interrogation. I suggest we hold a small meeting with the king and Arodi to assess the situation."

"My queen, you are very learned. How did you become so interested in the details of politics and warfare?"

Arme was in awe of the beautiful woman before him. While others might have confined themselves to their rooms in this state, his brother's bride was especially rumbustious and had no lack of knowledge in any field of her rule. It was astonishing and almost insulting, considering his shortcomings. Political intrigue had never really been compelling enough to delve into. As a simple man in a small village, one who never expected to even come to court, he had learned what he could out of curiosity, more than a need due to station.

Over the past summers, he'd decided he had no intention of it ever becoming a part of this life. Yet, something in him always drove him forward. It was how he had ended up in Fonecia during the cycle of frost before he had taken Hayli as his wife. This would have been a time just before Kimbaru's raids decimated the land. He had fallen in love with Fonecia, with the twinkling seas and cedar green peaks. Dualities were a part of his life. It made sense for the land of such sweet dualities to appeal to him. It called to his very essence. Looking at his queen now, he wondered if Hayadusta had ever ventured beyond Hayaran borders.

This woman—this beautiful, clever, and downright intelligent woman, due any day now, was pulling him in with her wit alone.

Over the past fortnight, he had decided that if for nothing else, then for this woman he would protect them all.

"As a princess, I decided I would be queen someday—not just the wife of a king, but a queen who ruled her country herself. I discovered in myself a reserve of strength my father often said was a trait normally attributed to men. My brother, on the other hand, has little interest in ruling whole kingdoms. He is a warrior, but not a leader. A kind warrior, at that. He is an excellent choice for an adviser to the king, close guard to the royal family. However, it is I who enjoys the whole sordid process. I find myself revitalized after each project successfully executed; thrilled at the thought of commanding so many and bringing about concrete results. I love to care for my people, to make decisions that positively affect their lives. It boils my blood when I am glossed over in meetings, and it gives me boundless joy when I find men are awe-struck when faced with an intelligent mind. It is thrilling really, to have haughty nobles grovel before me when I am proven correct in my assumptions. Dearest Arme, I simply enjoy being a queen."

Her smile was so bright, he decided he had no problem being lumped in with the unnerved fools who found in her a strong commander where they had expected a doe-eyed docile bride instead. He was honored to be in the presence of a woman such as her. Taking the queen's hand in his, Arme restated his oath before this rather unique entity, one he was now almost entirely convinced was an actual embodiment of Haya.

"My queen, I not only respect you and love you as I would a sister should I have had one, but I am also taken in by your keen intellect and inconceivable charm. That you nurture an additional family member of mine in your womb is simply the blue-hued obsidian here. Precious."

Smiling graciously, Hayadusta squeezed his hand in full encouragement.

"I give you my word and swear my life over to the crown, promising always to protect your family. You will have nothing to fear, so long as I am by your side. My life is yours, my queen. I chose

to forsake mortality because I felt it was my duty. Now, I swear my life to you, to do as you wish, because I have found in you something worth fighting for. Ethereal. It is as if you were also created for a reason beyond human imagination. You were destined to be the mother of all Hayara, the bringer of peace among warring nations, the uniter of a people, the nurturer of a nation and not just of the babe in your womb. I will give my life protecting you and all that you hold dear."

Drawing in a deep breath, he made a promise he hoped he would be able to keep. "So long as I draw breath, Hayara will never fall!"

Chapter Eighteen

Birth



Hayimi appeared at the royal castle not long after the imprisonment of Kaydeh. The boy had steadfastly refused to give up any information about his background or his allegiances, despite the tactics utilized. Arme had seen slight wavering in those eyes and decided against the use of force. Should the boy hail from enemy territory, it would work in their favor to have him witness kindness and a life of happy luxury instead. The queen had readily agreed and taken the boy under her wing, though they kept a close eye on him, and he was not truly as free as he wished to be.

Arme himself had been readying to set out to investigate the status of their neighbors when the young priestess had appeared at the gates, demanding an audience with the king and his warrior guest. Admitted into the antechamber reserved for special audiences with only the brothers present, Hayimi dropped her guard and offered a beaming smile. The contrast between the two was apparent, but it was a wonder people did not speak of the warrior as the king's blood; the resemblance was also quite striking. Eyes alight with playful banter, a small voice greeted the two, her hand bent to the heart, head lowered, knees locked, and eyes straight ahead. Her position allowed her certain liberties, and

Hayimi was not about to forgo this grace. She did not curtsy low like a commoner before a mighty king. Her show of respect was simpler, and one which made it quite clear she knew who and what she was. She might be young, but she understood she would have to assert herself from now if she were to be respected, perhaps even feared, once of age.

"Young priestess, what news do you bring?" If the king found fault with her semi-prostrate posture, he made no remark. Instead, he eyed the girl with intense scrutiny. She knew he was most wary when her grandmother was around, but it appeared she now also held this honor.

"A child will come before the next moon span. A child of wrath and war, of fire and passions untold."

Face draining of color, Arme managed to find his voice. "You speak of the babe my Hayli carries?"

"Correct, *Dakhanavar*."

"Why do you speak of it as if destruction will follow?"

"Destruction was always inevitable."

"You speak in riddles, child."

"And you understand nothing, Royal Brothers."

Audible gasps sounded as the guards within the antechamber suddenly realized the identity of their guest. Growling in anger, the king turned to the three unfortunate souls. "Should you not forget all that you have heard in here, right now, you and those you think to inform will face slaughter as traitors of the realm."

Fear etched on their faces, they scampered out, not at all inclined to ignite the king's wrath. None had seen him in such a state before, and despite the information they had inadvertently become privy to, the guards had no death wish. It was easier to pretend they had witnessed nothing, that they knew nothing.

Once entirely alone, Hayimi spoke up once more. "Please do not see this as more or less than it is. That child should not have been.

He had no place in my visions, no role in my dreams. It is not of this world, and I am unable to comprehend his worth or ascertain his destined path. All I can truly state is that he comes before the rise of the phoenix. It might be a secret weapon born of Ar, or the child himself might become the reason for the death of those we shall battle to protect."

Arme walked forward, drawn to the lyrical voice of the child before him. This time, it was not Haya that spoke through her. This time, it was something different. Is this what it meant for a priestess to share her visions? The child before him appeared changed ever since their fateful encounter on the day of his rebirth. He had only seen her a handful of times following that, but with each meeting, she developed a particular glow. A holy radiance, he thought. Not so bright as it had been when he had been turned into the creature he reluctantly embraced now, but enough to overwhelm the senses. Arme was drawn to it as a moth was to fire. It could burn him if he did not tread carefully. She could read him as if he spoke the words in his mind plain as day.

"My son?"

"Yes, your son. He will be fire. He will be beyond human. And he will be here so long as the gods see fit. You know this in your soul."

"He will be a weapon as I am, then?"

"He will transcend such titles, I fear. As I see it, there is so much fire. It is a benevolent one, though. Warm and safe. Combustible, yes. But not evil. Not malevolent. No, he has a kind soul. I see it now."

Silence prevailed in the wake of such an admission, agitating the men in the room.

"You see something, Priestess?" Arameni was horrified by her words but not immune to the curiosity gnawing at him. Arme, however, was visibly shaken and wondered how the king would react to seeing the prince strangle a messenger from the gods.

"He is a child of Ar." She closed her eyes, trying to make sense of the images suddenly rushing into her mind. Never had she felt such intense divinity. The speed with which the information became clear to her nearly dropped her to her knees. Gasping, she looked into Arme's eyes, shaking with sudden terror. "Almost a literal child!"

"What are you insinuating?"

"You are a vessel for the gods now. You embody a piece of Ar himself. In creating new life, you have transferred a portion of Ar into the child, as well," Hayimi tried to not stutter, wide sky-blue eyes boring into the *dakhanavar's* gold-flecked brown. "Grandmother must have seen this already. It must be why she keeps close watch over the pregnancy."

"High Priestess Hayisi?" The king had been relatively quiet, but the mention of the powerful woman brought him out of his daze.

Arme, too, was taken aback.

"The High Priestess is with my wife?"

"Yes, she is. Who did you think would deliver the babe?" While the vision had been painful and exhausting, Hayimi was rather enjoying the shock with which her words were greeted. She truly was mischievous when it came to exerting her power. She was in for a rebuke, of course, but the gravity of the moment called for a little mischief.

Arme knit his brows. "We had already talked to the midwife from the village. We were not worried about that at all. I do not know how Hayli is responding to all this, though."

"Honestly, I am not altogether convinced she will be thrilled with her offspring."

"What do you mean?"

"I remember her initial response to you until just before she fell pregnant."

"Yes, so do I. What point are you trying to make?" Suddenly

realizing the child was privy to information she could not have been exposed to, he frowned. "Did you see our interactions in a vision, as well?"

Waving off his question, she hit him with one of her own. "*Dakhanavar*, have you forgotten the hatred in her eyes over that which you have become?"

"You seem to enjoy reminding me about painful moments without tact, little one," Arme grumbled, feeling a sting every time she referred to him as the creature he was instead of by his given name.

Laughing a little, Hayimi allowed the power coursing through her to radiate through her gaze. It would typically be enough to bring those around her to heel. The royals were not about to kneel, but they took a step back in surprise.

"The world was created in duality. Night and day, dark and light. Chaos and order. Man and woman, parent and child. Looking at the two of you, that duality could not be more apparent. Two halves of the same being. Some decisions you will make together, some apart. All will lead to the same outcome." Tilting her head to the side, Hayimi appraised the one with the lighter features, comparing him to the darker prince. Yes, this is precisely where they should be—no doubt about it. Taking in a deep breath, she would have smiled to ease the men's apprehension if she did not feel something out of the ordinary. Closing her eyes, she sensed a slight malevolence within the walls. Someone in this castle was not who he or she seemed.

"The die has been cast by man and god alike. Destinies have already been determined. The wheel has begun to turn. My king, I suggest revisiting your allies and recounting potential enemies. The danger is closer than you seem to believe."

The grim line of the king's lips told her all she needed to know.



Leaving his newfound family had not yet been Arme's intention, but if the child priestess was correct, he was needed back home without delay. His beloved awaited him. Riding hard through the days and nights, only stopping long enough to give both his battered body and his steed a short break, Arme kept the amulet he had created for Hayli close to his heart, wrapped in the silk scarf he had spied during the first days of his visit. Arameni appeared intrigued by the thought of the trinket and decided to have a more extravagant version carved for his wife. His was split in two, however, where each would carry one half of the whole. Golden amulets of love, they called it. Arme's was safely tucked into his cloak as he sped through the forests, lush and green and full of the scent of budding flowers.

The rebirth of nature following the frost was by far his favorite of the seasons, though there was certain beauty in watching its colorful death before the days of Chari took hold.

Finally making his way down the river bend, Arme arrived to the screams of labor. He had not been here on time. He had not made it before the pain began so that he may comfort her. Dark thoughts filled his heart with guilt as he quickly dismounted, leaving his horse to graze as he ran into their home. Aran greeted him at the door, significantly matured since he last threw himself into his father's arms. The eyes appraising him in greeting now did not hold the smile that graced his lips. Instead, there was a different glow in there, something not quite right. Unable to focus on his eldest at the moment, Arme's only thoughts were of Hayli.

Pushing aside the intricately woven carpet separating their room from the rest, Arme stood before two very naked women, both glistening in sweat, one with a belly so swollen, the sight was enough to make him feel faint. Hayisi, the High Priestess of Haya—the woman who had taken it all from him—now stood behind his wife, massaging her lower back, speaking soothing words. Skilled

fingers appeared to be emitting light as Arme watched in wonder.

"What are you doing?"

"Gentling the pain, my son," came the patient reply.

"Arme!" Hayli's cries echoed through the cave, ringing in his ears.

"I'm here, my love," he spoke gently, moving before her where she knelt. The baby was coming. Her pain was immense; her eyes had glazed over and her breathing uneven. Holding her hands, he took his cue from the priestess and, following her example, tried to increase the inflow of air by emulating the proper breathing patterns.

"You came... back..." She ground out between flashes of agony as her contractions came in quicker.

"The moment I heard from the young priestess, *hokyag*."

"You should have come sooner!" She bellowed, screaming as a particularly rough wave hit.

"Yes," he nodded simply.

"I hate you!"

"I know."

"I love you," she sobbed when she could take a breath once more.

"I know."

Hayisi followed the exchange with sorrow in her heart. Emotions were fickle, and love often withered so quickly, it left one aghast at its untimely demise. These poor, unfortunate souls, she thought to herself. They did not deserve their fate. It would help neither to know the truth of their future nor that of the child's.

Moving softer furs under his wife's knees, Arme held her against him tenderly, even when she clawed at him in pain and bit down against his clothing. Encouraged by Hayisi, he decided to strip down; Ar only knows for how long that night he offered her solace, skin-to-skin. He would gladly take any beating she saw fit for

putting her in this situation. Dropping light kisses on her forehead, he tried not to wince when her response to his gentle love came as nails digging into his biceps. Slowly, as Aran stood guard at the entrance to their home and watched the dawn break along the horizon, a dark head appeared; liquid poured out of a body which felt as if it had been split in two, exhaustion set in; and as the womb finally expelled the child, the mother fell faint into darkness.

This birth was one Arme could never forget. It was as if the Earth itself called out. Aran ran in stating the stream had flooded and lightning had begun to crack the sky. The moment the babe entered the world, the ground shook. Later, he would hear tales of this night where bards sang of the heavens and the seas and the earth itself bowing to the birth of a child who was neither mortal nor beast. They would sing of the oceans turning to the color of apricots and reeds sprouting toward the sky like flaming columns.

It was a warm day, but in that moment, with the fire burning in the room, the heat became unbearable. The bards would say the rain was blazing and just as the inferno set upon the earth, a dark-matted fiery-haired babe came crying out of a woman the coming generations would forget. He was so very pale, so very red, and, strangely, so very dark. Arme could not understand what he was. The bards would sing of this enigma, as well. In the father's mind, however, came a vision of a youth, grown up from this vulnerable form, strong and steady, running like the wind and conquering the skies. He prayed to Ar it would be so.

When looking at the hapless creature, a fire burned through his mind. Arme stood frozen in place as Hayisi cradled that ball of light and brushed lips ever so gently against his forehead. "Like a phoenix," she smiled, picking up the salt to rub against the newborn's legs, ears, neck, under the arms, and a tiny bit on the tongue. An ancient ritual. Arme shuddered.

"My son?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps this was the prophecy?"

The priestess rejected his thoughts with a slight shake of the head as she nuzzled the life she had helped bring forth.

"No, not yet. This is only the beginning."

Looking at the boy more closely while cradling his unconscious wife in his arms, Arme suddenly pulled back.

"His eyes!"

"What of them?"

"Can you not feel what exists within them?"

"Yes, I feel the bright light. Twin suns."

"More! It is almost as if I see lightning and earthquakes there. He is blind at this stage, is he not?"

Holding the babe closer to her breast, Hayisi inhaled visions of all that may come. "This child is more than the eye can see. He is a bit of everything the Mother has to provide and then some. He is beyond all that we know of this world. You knew he could not be as your eldest, a true mortal. His eyes will not change color much, I reckon. Amber flames."

"Is he human?" Hayli had come to just enough to hear all this. Her heart beat wildly under his palm as she turned her gaze to the child she felt had been ripped right out of her. Aran had been a sweet boy, and his birth had been as expected, but uneventful. This time, Arme was crestfallen to see Hayli cringe at the sight of the babe.

"I wonder," was Hayisi's ominous reply.

"Is he, or is he not, you crazy woman?"

A sightless gaze rested on the woman before her. Hayisi offered the child to the mother, but Hayli's responses were wild and unexpected.

"Get it away from me!"

"He needs your sustenance, Daughter."

"No! No, no, no, no!"

Clawing at Arme, it was almost as if all the energy spent in the past hours was somehow replenished, her instinct forcing her to flee.

"Hayli, stop! What is wrong with you?"

"This is all your fault! Your fault! No child of mine could look like that. No child of mine could cause such emotions. This is no child of mine!"

Grabbing the wild woman's arms, Arme tried to pin his wife to his own body just as Aran ran in.

"Let her go!" The boy's tone was demanding as he stood protector over his mother. Finding some clothes for her to don, Aran looked at the crying red-haired boy with disdain.

"Son, the child needs his mother."

"Right now, she needs her true son."

Aran's words pierced through the hearts of all present. Hayisi predicted much pain in the coming summers, as Hayli showed little guilt over rejecting her own flesh and blood, and Arme was left helpless in the wake of it all. Taking the screaming boy from the priestess, he slowly approached his wife, ready to beg with everything he had to keep the babe alive.

"My soul, please care for our son. No matter what he is, he was born of our love. Our flesh. Our consummation. He is ours," Arme pleaded.

Lowering her eyes, Hayli took the child to her breast, allowing him to suckle on her life force despite the sudden pain where he latched on. She could not deny her husband's words. No matter what this little boy was, he was born from her womb, and thus as human as anyone else in that room. At least, she hoped.



Days blended into a fortnight and soon over a moon span passed by, yet the turmoil in his household never died down. Word had been received from the king that dreams plagued the queen and there was unrest on the borders. Reports got through stating a rebel horde from the south was making its way toward Hayaran lands. The spy they had caught had procured an audience with a priestess and somehow ended up missing from his prison. Amid the slowly boiling troubles, a once strong love had crumbled entirely, leaving carcasses in its wake.

"Arahur," Arme whispered, cradling his son to his naked chest. The boy slept best when resting skin to skin against his father.

"What a name," scowled Aran scornfully.

Arme watched as his eldest passed by, nothing but cruelty reflected on his features. What had happened to the sweet innocent child he had held in his arms, took out fishing, protected from the world? Hardening his heart to the boy's malice, Arme turned back to the newborn. This one would be kind and gentle, he vowed. This one would know no cruelty, no pain. He would trust in his father, would idolize him. While as a parent, Arme's heart shed tears at Aran's behavior, as a man, his pride would not allow him to confront the boy about it. Not when he knew Aran had simply sided with Hayli in this matter. Looking to where his wife mindlessly prepared the fish her son had brought home, Arme sighed. While she had nursed well enough in the beginning, the milk refused to come of late, and her melancholia had set in. It had become so dire at home that Arme found it hard to leave the child to go out hunting to sate his thirst. It had been too long since he had last fed and exhaustion threatened to topple him. Emotions controlled his lust. The lack of positive emotions stirred something base within him; the constant tamping only ignited the flames.

Lowering his head to kiss the top of the red mop of hair, Arme considered his options. It seemed he would have to take the babe with him as he set out to first find Hayisi and ask for her help and care, and then go to his brother. The call had been made. The messenger had arrived. He just needed to heed the summons and

stand by the king's side in protecting the realm. Perhaps he would be able to redeem himself in the eyes of his family then, he considered ruefully. Warriors were welcome.

Soon, he would go. Not today, nor tomorrow. Soon.

"For now, I just need to keep protecting you, my fiery child of Ar."



She had fallen against the large bronze bowl she often cooked in, her skin bleeding as the rough stone under it showed no mercy. There was blood on her temple. Her anger had faded, and she could not stop her tears. When had he become this monster? When had he changed this much? Her thoughts consumed her as she stared listlessly at the blood staining the dirt on the floor.

An otherworldly cry rang out, and she brought bloody hands to her ears. She should have killed it. She should take it and leave it to drown in the river. Smash its head in with a rock. She should... Shaking her head, she wondered if she even could; she had birthed the creature. She simply could not bring herself to do it. Could not bring herself to destroy it. In her eyes, it had no name, no gender. It was just dark and bright and pure fire. Not a proper child. It could not be real. Pale skin and dark red hair with eyes of dark amber. Shuddering at the image of the babe in her mind, she closed her eyes. Blood and tears mixed as she cried out in pain, swallowing hiccups and a lump in her throat which threatened to morph into unseemly wails. Why? She screamed the question over and over in her mind. Why?

"Hayli!"

Arme quickly strode in and picked up her seemingly broken body. She had lost a bit of blood, but this was not what hurt her most. He could see the dark questions in her eyes. They had been so strong, so good together. Now, hollow and lacking that

distinctive spark which had always drawn him to her, she lay there, staring into nothingness.

"Hayli, please, talk to me!"

Still, she lay, a living corpse not unlike himself. However, Arme had rigor and passion and loved with a vengeance even he was unaware of. She... she was just a shell of her former self. She was lost to him, to their Aran, to his beautiful Arahur. Suddenly, the iron scent of her blood hit him with full force. Where her presence had once tamed the beast within him, mellowed the lust, this version of her was as if a sacrifice. She could not bring herself to be anything else.

Eyes were fixated on the dripping red substance, and she was glad the children were out of sight. Lowering his lips, he licked against her temple, closing his eyes to savor the blood. It spoke to him of pain, of the darkness of the soul, of impure thoughts and sadness so deep, he feared he might drown in it himself. She was certainly drowning and there was no one to save her.

Like a dagger to his heart, it unleashed memories, emotions, and everything she must have believed about him over the past moon spans. Howling at this information, he attacked her neck, drowning himself in her scent, in his love, and the blood that bonded them anew. Shaking uncontrollably, he drank, and he drank, until he felt her heartbeat slow. Only then did he stop. She wanted him to drink her pain away. He tried to fill her with his love. However, in his haste and loss of control, he had now lost it all.

Red tears stained his cheeks, and he held her close. Her eyes had a new light in them, but instead of her love, instead of her depression, instead of her anger, they glowed with loathing.

Part V

Chapter Nineteen

War



It all began under cover of night. Peace had become so prevalent that people slept without worry, the warming days allowing for open doorways and hatches in most homes. Even the animals in the region had become accustomed to a duller state of the circle of life, living as the code of nature dictated: hunt, eat, and sleep. The borders felt the tremors first. The ground shook in anticipation and fear, while warning fires lit in pyres, mere moments before disappearing once more, snuffed out by the enemy that crept in. Slithering snakes, quietly maneuvering, leaving only corpses behind to litter the checkpoints. Whispers exchanged in haste as

cruel and uncanny warriors mixed in with the unsuspecting populace.

As the morning light broke across the horizon, Kimbaru had managed to slay an alarming number of the guards along the southeastern borders. The villages had become overrun with rivers of blood. None noticed the group which dispersed and disappeared into the thick of the forests. Most did not see the death that hung over their heads.

Riding forward in confidence, Kimbaru grinned. Slanting eyes over the beautiful expanse of land, he inhaled the sweet scents of a dewy morning with a rush of adrenaline in his veins. They had found their new home.



"My Lord!"

"Boy?"

Informants had broken the news about an approaching army over a fortnight back, leading to Arameni's rally of allies and nobles. The southern borders were under the most significant threat, though they had not discounted the idea of smaller deadly attacks from the seas that now encircled Hayara. Vassal kings had risen in anger at the mention of invasion. Lord Artash, former King of the Arani, had taken charge of protecting the southwestern borders nearest to the archipelago and the sea, preferring to come into the thick of battle and believing it to be the most likely place to breach. One of his boys stationed along the eastern villages had arrived before the sun hailed high noon, panting and calling for his lord. The men had been readied for such an occasion, no matter which checkpoint the enemy attacked first. Knitting his brows, Artash nodded to his second in command, signaling him to prepare the troops; he would send a message to Artasa, who stood where the eastern borders met with the Arkana Sea.

"A breach!"

"I thought so. Where are the commanders?"

"Dead."

Paling slightly, Artash sat in his seat and beckoned the boy closer. He could not have been over twelve summers of age. The boys were chosen based on their speed and unique skills; this one was adept at blending into the shadows and disappearing quickly when danger struck. The informants were generally orphans forced into a life of thievery for their survival; ones left to fend for themselves. The child before him was a particularly useful messenger, disarming with his gentle demeanor but with a sharp sight able to detect even the slightest of movements. Artash might have no longer ruled, but it was always good to have a network of spies in these children, protecting the land and people he loved most. King Arameni might not have agreed with such tactics, as he had proven himself a rather straightforward individual, but Artash was not one to relinquish all control. Clothe them, feed them, show them a little love, and these boys were loyal to the end. He had even found a young girl with the sly nature of a fox, able to outsmart even the sharpest of louts in the streets. She must be around eight summers, he thought; no more than ten. He was sure she would show herself soon enough as well.

"Explain," he demanded of the boy.

"Dressed in dark cloth, only eyes exposed, a group moved into the village of Nama. It is now full of corpses. The initial invaders were so quiet, it was as if they were the trained assassins of the Far East we hear legends about. Then a group moved in on horseback. Aru, Aren, and Arama had noticed them as well and followed their instincts, meeting in the village. We shared information quickly and dispersed. Arama should have gotten the message through to Lord Artasa's encampment."

"How many?"

"Hard to tell, but between the assassins and their commander's group on horseback, I reckon around three hundred."

"Anything else to add?"

"It seemed like a small part of a large attack."

Nodding, Artash smiled grimly at the boy. "Well done."

"What will come next, my lord?"

"Now, we fight for the fate of our Hayara. No matter the cost to our own lives, this nation cannot fall."

"My orders, my lord?"

"Eat, rest, and be ready to ride with us."

Bowing his head, the informant excused himself, heading toward the kitchens to satiate his hunger and thirst. For him, this was the ideal job. He hoped once the war was over and the enemy destroyed, there would be a more permanent place in the lord's household for him.

While the slaves fussed about, Artash began barking orders. Within moments, horses were saddled, the men were armored, and a strategy was drawn up. A messenger arrived stating Artasa's intentions of hiding his assassins across the border towns, particularly the forested regions. Another came from Arodi, with details of the king's activities described as well as his seal of approval for any moves Artash planned to make. Until the superior commander's arrival, Artash would be in charge.

"Of course," he grinned, bloodlust boiling in his veins.

"My lord?" The boy approached on horseback. It would be easier to arrive at his destination thus, and Artash had no intention of losing any of his precious messengers. They were too well trained, too talented to lose in battle due to foolhardiness.

"Ride ahead and sneak into Nama, boy. We will be behind you. You know the signals."

Nodding, he took off, heading toward the pyre on the hill. He had his flint and fire steel in his pocket and knew the smoke combination to put out. A fresh development by the boys' spy group, it would certainly get the message across to Lord Artasa in

time.

Turning to his men, Artash accounted for his archers, skirmishers, cavalry, and sword bearers. They had all doubled up on the horses to increase their speed as they rode into battle. It would take half a day to get to their destination, but the informant had ensured they knew precisely what they were riding into.



As Artash made his way to the breach in the border, Arameni bid his wife goodbye. Heart beating with foreboding, he tamped down on his more negative emotions and pulled her into his arms.

"You will win," she stated with conviction.

"I will always come back to you. There isn't a mountain high enough or an ocean so deep to keep me away from you."

Running his fingers through her hair, Arameni stared into the eyes of the woman who had ensnared his heart. Time and again she had proven stronger, more logical, and more efficient than any esteemed adviser. Clenching his eyes shut, he pulled her close. He did not know if the battle would be won, but he had no desire to leave this treasure he had stolen from the banks of past enemies alone in this world. She belonged to him.

"I love you, my king." Smiling as she pulled him closer, Hayadusta rested her chin on his armored shoulder; lips turned to his exposed nape. "I will always love you." Her whispers caused a shiver where breath touched skin. Once he donned his helmet and armored gloves, he would not feel her touch anymore. He basked in the sensations for a few moments longer, standing before the looming palace of great stone and mortar. If this had been any other day, he wouldn't have noticed, let alone have been suddenly enamored by the incredible craftsmanship, the artistry in the carved reliefs across the outer walls, stories of heroics, of kings and queens, the grandeur of gods immortalized for the millennia to come.

Tightening his hold, he tried to relay his love for her physically, as well as with words. "And I, you. You are the reason for my existence, the very essence of our nation. Remember your promise, Queen Hayadusta."

She nodded, understanding this was neither the time nor the place to argue. She stepped on tiptoe and, winding her arms around her husband, kissed him with all the fervor expected of a woman parting from her husband forever. He should have become accustomed to her bold attitude by now, but she never ceased to amaze. Remembering something almost as an afterthought, he sobered.

"Take my seals if anything happens."

"Your seals?" Hayadusta knew the three seals he mentioned. She had admired the impeccable precision with which both cuneiform and glyphic had been utilized in their creation. Only the king carried cuneiform on his seal, assurance to their allies that it was indeed Arameni behind the summons or information presented. From his court, only the queen, Arodi and Aris knew where these clay pieces were hidden. She would ensure none managed to find them, he knew.

"Take them with you if you are forced to flee," he commanded, relieved when she nodded without protest. Before turning away to mount his horse, Arameni gave his queen's hand one last squeeze.

"Take care of our future."

Gently rubbing her massively swollen belly, Hayadusta beamed. "Our child will be an outstanding commander and king someday."

Gloves were pulled on, and the helmet secured in place. Lifting himself onto the saddle gracefully, he pushed his cape behind him, red and gold fluttering behind a leather clasp. A golden cross of the sun graced it, the sigil of the House of Hayara. The ancients called it the arevakhatch; an equilateral cross of four points, the arms bent at perfect angles as if a spiral, appearing ready to spin into the sky. He saw his life slipping away, but presented a proud and confident

facade to those around him.

"Bring back our peace," she spoke from the heart, a spark of determination in her eyes. Arameni knew the pain she hid under a serene smile, but kept up the charade. Better to part with kind words and looks of love than to be reminded of her agony before facing death.

"I will not rest until I do, my queen. I assure you. Summer is nearly upon us, and I would see my family bathe in the sun, once the days warm enough for a swim."

"Beware the changing seasons, my love."

"Let the seasons beware!" His grin was infectious, and he knew he challenged the gods.

Nodding, she lifted a hand to her heart and then her forehead in a king's salute. Looking to the sky, Arameni prayed she would stay safe before kicking at his horse's flanks and riding forward to join his men. Kimbaru would not win; he chanted in his mind. "I will be victorious," he growled to the darkening skies as a heavy gust of wind blew in with an unnatural fall of icy rain in its wake. He rode despite the omen, Arodi and his company of ten thousand men behind him.



The message was clear, and Arme knew his place as he turned the golden sigil over in the palm of his hand, standing out where the sun nearly blinded him with its intensity. He wondered if it had anything to do with the constant change in his eyes, blinking a few times to bring the etching into focus. He would join the king on the battlefield and aid in the destruction of his enemies. Though he'd never been a warrior, this was one campaign he had no right to miss. He had been trained at court. Everything was in order physically, but his heart was torn. His brother awaited him; his duty called with siren's song. Yet the babe held him back.

"The child will not survive your absence," an irate Hayli spat, approaching him from behind.

Shaking his head, he tried to reason with a madwoman. It was an impossible feat nowadays. "

You would kill your flesh and blood?"

"I need not kill him. He is nothing to me," she replied darkly.

Eyes narrowed, arms crossed, Hayli stood legs slightly apart, her scowl in direct contrast with the serenity of their surroundings. The pregnancy had left many scars on her soul, but it was her body's changes which fascinated him the most. After Aran's birth, she had become beautiful with her love. Her skin had been alight with a motherly glow. Now, she seemed to have lost so much weight that she was but a walking corpse. Alabaster skin had dulled in luster, the look in her eyes shuttered and with a glint he rather preferred not to understand. Her hair kept shedding until it had thinned out considerably. Her milk dried up and her once youthful body was no more. It was no wonder she hated the child with such a passion, a pain the boy might never know he caused. Yet Arme sometimes found himself staring, fascinated, as the babe she carried despite her words looked at her with wise, sorrowful eyes.

Amber eyes he realized she avoided like the plague.

"Be reasonable, Wife."

His tone was sharp, but he felt too weary to argue.

Arme had had enough of her wild antics. He often fed on her now. Her dimming love and increased animosity drove him to the brink of lust. Strangely enough, she allowed him to do so. It had almost become a ritual of sorts during the past moon span; somehow, she seemed to enjoy the moments, contrary to her glares and the half-hearted struggles. It was the only intimacy they could now share, and even battered hearts desire the presence of a bond. Arme might never have touched her if not for the degeneration of a once beautiful courtship into a convoluted mess of vile emotions that stripped the soul raw. How could such warm desire and

kinship morph into such dreadful loathing? He could not fathom.

"I'm never reasonable these days," she uttered menacingly, that eerie lift to her lips back in full force. She put the child down into the hand-woven reed bassinet they had placed outside, perched on a log cut just perfectly to accommodate its size. Turning to him, she sighed before appraising her husband's attire with veiled thoughts.

"No, you seem to have lost yourself. You need to pray to Haya for help because human intervention will not cure you of this particular illness," he muttered, his sadness softening the impact of his insult.

"Then get rid of me."

"You speak absurdity."

"Truly? Tell me you have not wanted to finish me, as you slowly wring my life out with every feeding?"

"I have not," he responded indignantly.

Taken aback, she looked at him questioningly, accusations dying on her lips. "Not even once?"

"No!"

"Despite every horrible thing I have said and done to you," she wondered aloud.

"Despite it all, my love. You are my wife, and I was always happiest in your arms, even if you wished me dead."

"I did not wish you dead," she whispered, suddenly unsure of herself.

Sighing, he pulled her to him. Placing a light kiss on her forehead, he implored, "Keep both our sons safe, Hayli. For my sake, if not the gods. I go to fight a war that will most probably destroy this land and everything in it before it ends. I do not know if I will come back alive. There are no guarantees."

She wanted to struggle against his tenderness. He knew she did. He was not sure why she finally gave up, arms limp at her side,

breathing shallow as she tried to calm her mind.

"You will leave me a widow. I have never seen you in armor, never even pictured you in one. I fear I will never see you again."

"I cannot be killed, my sweet."

"You do not know this!"

"No, but I will always find my way to you."

Now freely allowing the tears to fall, she wound her arms around his waist, careful not to slice her skin on the rough exterior of his protective plates. "Don't go."

"I would rather spend my days with you. You know that."

"Even if I make it impossible to enjoy," she laughed mirthlessly. She knew her faults better than any, but had trouble keeping her emotions at bay. He knew this, and so he held his tongue.

"Even then," he smiled. "This was all my fault."

"Yes."

Stroking her hair, he peppered kisses across her features. Right now, in the morning light, it almost seemed as if she was her healthy, beautiful self once more.

"Arme, I will protect Arahur. I promise."

Sinking to his knees before her, as far as his armored limbs allowed, he kissed her hands, reverently caressing her wrinkling skin, rubbing the pad of his thumb against her flaking nail beds. Yes, she was still beautiful, he thought as he laid his head against her belly.

"Thank you, Hayli."

"Do you love me, Arme?"

"You are my wife, the one dearest to me. I have loved you from the day we met and will love you so long as we draw breath." He meant those words; despite the pain, the loathing, the utter denial of that which they had become, when the day to part had finally

arrived, the love washed it all away. She would forever be the mother of his children, and even if their relationship had deteriorated to such a toxic point, for that reason alone, he could love and respect her.

"Thank you," she sighed. "I know I don't deserve it."

"I think we both have long ceased to deserve the other, *hokyag*." Standing, he kissed the top of her head and looked toward the child. Hayisi would be here to pick up the boy soon, he knew, though Hayli was not privy to such details yet.

Nodding, she moved her hair aside. "Do you need to feed?"

"I do, I believe," he knit his brows at her willingness, the quiver of excitement in her voice. This was a rare sight indeed. Lowering his lips, he found the spot where the blood gushed best and bit hard. He had had no intention of hurting her again, but it had almost become a game. His wife's behavior both unnerved and pleased him; he rather enjoyed her depravity in those moments.

Despite the emotionally charged environment Arahur was placed in, the boy gazed at his parents with a smile, arms stretching forward in the hopes that one of them would pick him up and show him some love. He might only have been a newborn, but there was a maturity in his gaze that Arme had noticed. The boy was certainly not what he seemed.

"Love the boy, if you can," Arme spoke up, after having drunk his fill of her blood.

"I cannot. However, I will not harm him," she promised.

Nodding, he turned to his stallion. "That will be alright for now. I hope I have given him enough love to last the coming moon spans."

"Do not sound so sad," she admonished, guilt coloring her features. It hurt to see her husband's stricken expression.

Blowing her a kiss as he mounted, he turned toward their home where his son had stepped out. Raising his hand to his heart and

then forehead in the king's salute, he turned around and galloped onto the dirt road leading him to his foretold destiny. Hayli vowed she would see him again, no matter the circumstances, before swooping Arahur into her arms, bringing him close to her chest, and sweeping into her home with renewed strength and resolve to at least do the right thing by her husband now.



Aran watched his parents in shock, genuinely seeing his father for the monster he had become. He had also heard their exchange, witnessed the gleam in his mother's eyes. She did not hate this, he noticed. On the contrary, despite the obvious pain etched on her face, she moved closer instead of running away. He watched as the two he had trusted most in the world, the two who had all but forgotten about his existence, engaged in activities that were nauseating at best. He was sad about seeing his father leaving once again, but the realization that he was the only one so painfully human in his family was startling. Even his mother, who had held on to her humanity, had officially birthed an inhuman child. It was a little too much for a young man of eight summers to swallow.

"Do they still love me?" He questioned his world and the pitiful few who inhabited it once more, losing count of how often the thought crossed his mind of late.

Chapter Twenty

Inferno



As Arameni moved his army, picking up new conscripts along the way, Arme rode hard from the east, passing Arzawa, who patrolled the region, and arriving near the Plains of Aydaha with just over a hundred of his brother's most loyal men from the nearby villages. These were men who did not have to wait for the rally call to pick up their weapons, often home-forged to protect against skirmishers, bandits, and more violent groups sometimes passing through these lands. Eager to defend their home, the riders moved swiftly on horses not yet trained for combat but strengthened under the daily pressures of village life. Led by the Dark Prince, whose eyes now shone with a fire few had ever seen in gold, the small squadron made its way toward the king. The men had no doubt this would be a bloody battle, but all were ready to put down their lives in protecting their homeland. As for the man leading them, rumors had spread across the nation about the fierce weapon of the gods, a man with the powers of Ar, a warrior immortal. While the questions about his mysterious lineage were left unanswered, the men trusted this being to bring them to victory alongside their king.

Few had dared attack in the past, and for many summers now — aside from the Battle of Brothers, as they affectionately named the

war between the Arani and Harrani—Hayara enjoyed a peace rarely found in these regions of constant strife.

"My lord, we will win. Consider it a promise," one called out as they slowed and rounded a bend, spotting the king's entourage before them.

"We cannot afford to lose, my friend," Arme responded, apprehension in his heart. Something felt very wrong. He could sense it at the core of his being. He tried to pinpoint the cause by bringing his family to mind, but this did not seem to be the root of his unease. Shaking his head, he wondered once again if he was even ready for this. He knew how to wield a sword, but he was nowhere near proficient in the art of war. They had begun his training while he was at court, but what he had learned barely scratched the surface. He could rely on brute strength, of course, but even with his newly discovered quick healing, he was positive the enemy's frightfully sharp armaments would hack his limbs off before that particular skill had any effect. Hoping he was indeed the weapon needed in this war, he fixed his gaze on the road ahead.

Lifting a hand to halt his group as they drew closer, Arme kicked his steed's flank and zipped to his brother's side. He noticed a tightness to the usually confident king's features as the monarch looked on ahead, seemingly oblivious to the new group's arrival. Approaching steadily, Arme threw him a rueful grin.

"If I were the enemy, you would be dead," he muttered.

"If you were the enemy, I would be spared this sight," the king responded, eyes glued to whatever he had glimpsed in the distance.

Curious, Arme turned to find the problem at hand. What he spied sent shivers down his spine. His sight was infinitely better than the king's, and just as Arameni appeared paralyzed, Arme felt the fear he tried to keep at bay bubble to the surface. It was as if a geyser had erupted from within. Death. Festering bodies left out in the heat. The carcasses lay there under the mournful sun, as Ar tried to scorch life into his children once more. Searing anger broke through him.

"That bastard!"

The king's sidelong glance and throaty guttural sound made clear the brothers were of one opinion. They would kill the enemy commander if it were the last thing they did. Pulling at the reins, Arameni maneuvered his ride toward Sheba. Arme knew that was where they would encounter the enemy's main forces, for, beyond the charred, the mutilated, the crimson rivers bloated with the broken souls, the prince spotted an army so large, his eyes nearly bulged in their sockets.

"How many are there?" He whispered almost inaudibly.

"The dead, the living, or the ones with weapons moving against us?"

"I see you have kept some semblance of your signature humor, Brother," Arme allowed with a small smile. They were far enough ahead for none to hear their conversation, to realize their mysterious leader was indeed the crown prince.

"Sometimes, that is all one has to hold on to keep one's sanity intact. Tell me, Arme, how many do you see?"

"Over twenty thousand, without a doubt."

"I fear this might be beyond our abilities." Furrowing brows, Arameni began to recalculate strategies in his mind. "I am positive Arodi and Artash spotted the armies. Artasa would be too far from this carnage yet. I am hoping against hope this is the only attack of such magnitude."

Nodding, Arme fell to a light trot beside his brother, conserving energy and keeping eyes trained on the adversary. "A multi-pronged attack with such numbers from each side would surely devastate the nation."

Arameni did not say a word, lost in thought as they moved forward.

Narrowed eyes tried to gauge their chances for survival. "Correction. Possibly around twenty-five thousand armed men

down there."

"My thoughts exactly, though there might be more."

"Any news from Lord Artash or the others?"

"Not as of yet. Though the messengers might have been killed along the way." Growling, Arameni tried to calm his nerves. Both knew they were going into this battle mostly blind. No smoke or fire signals had been seen. No runner boy had arrived with news. Either they were too early or too late, but Arme knew something was just not right.

"My king, what are your orders?" He knew that while they held the advantage of surprise at the moment, Kimbaru's forces did not yet seem keen on moving. On the contrary, he spotted a few setting up camp.

"They want us to come to them."

"But we will not, I think?"

Laughing mirthlessly, Arameni did not tear his eyes from the gore and death before him. He could smell the rusty scent of blood, brought by a wind of sudden chill, a gift for the king. They stopped near the Arabos Mountains, where the ground was a dusty red, nature's illusion instead of the blood they already dreaded. The sight of red sand in the desert helped steel the prince's heart. The exposed skin responded to the cool breeze, hair standing on end as a shiver ran down his spine. His heart felt so still, he wondered if it had frozen in place.

A sense of foreboding had taken root in the king as well. "I hope we survive to see the birth of my son."

"What are you thinking, Brother?"

"That I cannot and will not abide by failure." It was simply inconceivable. Losing to the enemy today would be an unforgivable option. "No. We will win and drive this dreadful incarnation of a mountain dragon into the soil. I will use his butchered army as feed for my gardens. Hayara will prevail. I shall make sure of it."

"We might need more assistance, my king." Arme spoke words the king was surely thinking, his voice breaking the eerie silence of the moment as the armored horse neighed, quite uneasy under him.

"We have the grace of Ar. We have our weapon from the gods themselves. Divinity is on our side," Arameni grinned suddenly, sweeping an arm out to show the surrounding land. An eagle soared above, while the howls of a wolf could be heard in the distance. "The gold in your eyes has spread, all-consuming. That appears a good omen. We may not know much about the power of the 'weapon,' but I am quite eager to find out. Perhaps armies are not needed when the gods grant you otherworldly creatures to fight by your side." He nodded toward where the chariots were lined up, the archers ready for their commands, the cavalry trotted nervously in place, while the rest of the infantry shifted with unease in phalanx formation.

Arameni positioned his troops behind the ruined city of Arkesh. From his perch, Arme saw the barbarian commander on the horizon snap the necks of three boys. It was nauseating to watch, and he was glad the king's sight was not nearly as sharp. Arameni had not noticed all that had transpired among the carnage of their border populace, either. The *dakhanavar* was positive more had died similarly insipid deaths at the hands of the ruthless giant. Now the enemy began to move.

Before them, Kimbaru led an army of four divisions, each headed by one of his top warriors. They had fought with many a local tribe and won. Now, Arme counted around twenty-four thousand men: sixteen thousand infantry, three thousand cavalry, another four thousand archers and a thousand chariots. This attack would be brutal.

On their side, the king led with three divisions, while his cousin, Prince Arzawa, was in charge of another battalion patrolling the eastern borders for possible raids. He'd built up an army of over twenty-one thousand; with around two thousand chariots, twelve thousand infantry, five thousand archers, and cavalry of two thousand. Arameni brought into battle various allied chieftains of

neighboring and absorbed clans. They flew the crimson- and gold-colored banners, while some of the lesser tribes also brought out their family sigils. Unfortunately, some of their numbers had been stationed with Arodi and Artasa, while a sizable number had coalesced with the former king, Artash. He would have to wait for their arrival, as that meant the invaders outnumbered them at least two to one.



Kimbaru had split his forces, with a smaller band crossing the ford in an area south of the town of Shaba, a day's ride from where he stood. Initially, the commander had been misled into thinking the Hayaran forces were much further off through misinformation by inept spies. Frowning, Kimbaru let his mind wander to Kaydeh, wondering about the boy's wellbeing. The Hayaran king had not gifted him the boy's head, nor had any threats been issued. That was strange in and of itself and worthy of respect. The monarch clearly meant to fight him at every turn, and the commander respected that the king showed no formalities in relaying his message or stating his intentions. Kimbaru had found armies amassed across the borders and knew he would have to circumvent warriors of great strength. Of course, should Kaydeh have been found to be a spy, the boy had kept his true allegiance a secret. Arameni's lack of confrontation had been quite telling of this. It made his heart proud. He would have to find Kaydeh, sooner rather than later. In the meantime, there was much to be done.

The first ranks of Kimbaru's army were composed of those he trusted most, men who were as steadfastly loyal as they were bloodthirsty. They had been at the forefront of the attack which now permeated the earth with its stench, the ground crunching beneath them between pools of slick wetness causing the occasional slip and stumble. Proceeding forward, Kimbaru could make out the sigil of the Hayaran Royal Guard atop the hill in the distance, banners unfurled and flying high with the cursed golden sun-cross

emblazoned on a dark, crimson-stained cloth. Something about one particular figure standing there, despite his inability to make out the man's features, brought a pang of fear into Kimbaru's heart.

"Why?" he muttered under his breath, careful none could hear.

"Did you say something, Commander?"

"Not at all." His cold response and piercing look startled his men.

With lowered gaze, the fool who dared give voice to thought frowned. "Forgive me, my lord."

Kimbaru wondered if the troops ahead included the king himself. If so, what kind of man was he, really? Would he run when the fighting took a nasty turn? His boys had scoured the area for possible traps and had found none. It was clear the king had newly arrived if he was even there among the warriors sent to put a stop to his procession. As Kimbaru approached the region earlier, reports of the king staying sequestered back in his castle in Aratta alongside his heavily pregnant wife were received. The thought of taking the queen and running his blade over her belly brought a spark to his eyes. Yes, he would undoubtedly enjoy the horror on her face as he desecrated sacred ground with the blood of mother and child, the most revered beings on this land. He knew that while a woman was undoubtedly second to her husband here, a state of pregnancy elevated her status to near that of a priestess.

Suddenly, his body was responding in a manner not even Ramona could entice. Oh, it would be a sweet victory indeed to watch all that these people held dear and sacred crumble to dust while he took his pleasure. The Hayarans were most definitely not ready for a force as fierce and bloodthirsty as his own.

Without warning, a scout from Kimbaru's camp arrived with two prisoners in tow. Cocking his head, the commander warily eyed the young men. Blond and blue-eyed, their origins were easy to decipher.

"Hayaran spies?"

"Yes, my lord," responded the scout, nodding in reverence.

Keen eyes swept over the prisoners. So young, he thought, with a lick to his lips. Young men barely old enough to grow a full beard. Too bad they had to die. Usually something he might relish, his thoughts turned to other manners by which he might want to enjoy them before slitting their throats. Perhaps he would keep that particular event for when the Hayaran king was firmly in his possession, as well? Now that was a thought which made his eyes sparkle. A nasty smile graced thin lips as he eyed the boys as a predator would its prey.

"Who are you?"

"We belong to the King and Queen of Hayara," they responded with fire in their eyes. It was clear they did not want to be anywhere near the battlefield. While they spoke heatedly, the fidgeting did not go unnoticed. That only made the whole deal sweeter for the commander.

"You belong to them?"

"Indentured of our own free will," the taller one spat.

Raising a brow, Kimbaru ignored him. "And what are you doing here?"

Clamming up, both boys stared back in defiance, not a single drop of sweat on their brows. Masking his slight surprise, Kimbaru grinned sadistically. "You will tell me, of course. You will tell me the truth, or you will find I have means that are a touch more... persuasive."

The tall one decided to push his luck, it appeared. "Are you daft, sir?"

The other did not seem keen on angering Kimbaru, but stood upright with a confidence betrayed by the constant movement of his throat. The nervous tick was enough to amuse the commander for the moment.

"Humor me," he replied, eyes twinkling.

"You are a despicable man," the boy continued. He towered over

his companion by at least a foot and had a slender build, his beard still a mere shadow of what it could be. Perhaps seventeen summers the boy had lived, Kimbaru mused. Interesting specimen. He might not kill these two just yet. Teasing them alone had such a heady effect.

"Yes," he replied simply, taunting the boys with a sneer.

"A beast. You dare threaten our peace." His anger was now palpable, his youthful fire unable to keep the icy facade he had just barely held until that moment. Commendable, really, for one so young.

"You have food, you have shelter, you have great wine. Why would I not?"

The nervous fool before him now looked sharply back, horror etched on his features. "You would sacrifice an entire nation for your own gluttony?"

"Quite right." Kimbaru leaned back against his mount, one leg crossed over the other. He was not sure whether he had been under the sun too long, but the boys were boring him already. Incredulous, the taller of the two held his tongue. It was clear the man was toying with him. Kimbaru knew the thought processes here. Better to give clipped, short answers and hope to find an escape route in the meantime. Perhaps the ensuing chaos of the upcoming battle would afford them such an opportunity. Yes, this was boring.

"We were spying."

"For whom?"

"The king, of course!" Exasperation was evident in the boy's voice, Kimbaru noted. He had come to terms with his fate but would seek a way out should the opportunity come knocking. Green boys such as these two had brought him much amusement in the past. Those mouths could be useful for many things aside from talking silly nonsense.

"Where is the king?"

Surprised, the two looked at one another. "Can you not see him?"

"Yes, I believe so. How many with him?"

At this, they turned mum.

"I don't think I made myself clear," Kimbaru narrowed his eyes. "I have means of figuring things out. So, I suggest you do not make my work duller by cooperating," he drawled.

Flashing eyes met with dark frosty gray, neither willing to step back. The younger of the boys appeared to want to speak up then, fear for their lives an effective deterrent to the battle his partner seemed to have in mind. Before he could answer, the taller stepped on his foot so hard, he bellowed in pain instead.

"It could not be duller than this."

"You are right, of course," Kimbaru grinned as he unsheathed his dagger. "You do have pretty faces. I'll let you keep those for now. Fingers are unnecessary though, I think."

A sharp intake of breath, but the boys did not budge. The smaller one looked ready to cry, though. His face was a botched red, lips set in a grim line. Easy to break.

"I imagine it would give you great pleasure to cut us up."

Intrigued by the youth's boldness, Kimbaru approached. Lightly nicking the skin at his neck, he moved the other hand down to the boy's manhood, earning a gasp and the onset of fear in those bright blue eyes.

"What is your name, spy?"

"Hayara," he responded defiantly.

Laughing, Kimbaru grabbed him with such force, the boy keeled over in pain. "Try again."

"My father is Ar, my mother, Haya. I have no other name," he spat.

"Your friend might be a sniveling fool, but you are amusing, boy. If you give me no name to call you, I must come up with my own."

Cocking his head, Kimbaru thought for a few moments. "What was your word for 'king'?"

Confused, the boy gazed back unflinchingly before shrugging his shoulders. "Arka."

"Then you are Arka to me. It matters not what your parents named you. You will never see them again, as it is."

"You can call me donkey if that is your wish. It does not change who I am," the boy ground out with a small smile. The hand on his body was excruciatingly painful, but he was not about to give up.

"Well, Arka, how about you watch me make a eunuch out of this pathetic creature beside you?"

The shorter spy had been watching this exchange aghast, his entire being in flight mode. Should his hands not have been bound and the uncouth warriors around him not so deadly, he would have fled the scene long ago. Now, with the threat of a dagger against his nether regions a genuine danger, he hit the ground in a dead faint.

Laughing at this turn of events and knowing the enemy grew restless the longer he delayed, Kimbaru turned back to his new plaything, disregarding the child on the ground. His men moved in to take the boy prisoner. It would be quite the enjoyable delicacy for his loyal officers to have their way with him in celebration once the enemy was destroyed.

"That was disgraceful." Tracing his fingers across the beautiful cheekbones of the boy still standing, he leaned in to whisper in Arka's ear. Blood draining from his face, the Hayaran spy looked somewhat unsteady on his feet, as if ready to join his friend on the ground.

Turning to the one who had found the boys, Kimbaru prodded. "Do you have any information?"

"Yes, sir. There were too many to count. I managed to eavesdrop on a few conversations, and it appears there are more on the way. If I had to wager, however, you outnumber the king's army as of right now, nearly two to one."

"Commander," a man standing by Kimbaru's side spoke. "I believe we are looking at an easy battle, if that is the case."

"Why are there so few warriors?"

"Many have passed away or become too weary of war, sir," the barbarian informant answered.

"No, he lies!" Suddenly fiery eyes flashed again, and Kimbaru could only smile inwardly at the defiance in that gaze. Deference was undoubtedly not the boy's strong suit.

"Does he?"

"Yes. The former King of the Arani has joined hands with the King of the Harrani and, along with the princes of the neighboring lands, protects us all. They are fully armed, more numerous than the grains of sand on our beaches. They are ready for battle, but they wield more than the obsidian and the bronze weapons. You'd best beware, for they have the fires of Ar on their side."

Guffawing at the stoic anger with which the boy presented this information, Kimbaru looked at the sun overhead. "That is your god?"

"Ar comes in many forms. The sun is but a representation of Him. I believe even the barbarians of the southern world acknowledge their god's existence through the sun."

"My dear boy, I think I just might keep you," Kimbaru grinned. The boy reminded him of Kaydeh. The younger was nigh useless to him, but this one... this one he would keep as his pet.

"Rattas, please take them both as prisoners of war. I will think of the right time and place for execution. For now, use chains so they cannot break free. I'd rather not have to hunt down my pets," he smirked.

At the mention of pets, Arka paled. He had an inkling as to what the southern masters of larger settlements brought young males home for, it seemed. Interesting. Kimbaru found it rather amusing how many parents used this to keep headstrong youth at bay.

However, Arka and his friend were not street children, nor orphans without a home. This he'd immediately noticed. They came from well-bred and even well-educated families; their earlier words gave away their positions as royal spies favored by the monarchs, both quite proud of their heritage.

"No one will reduce us to mere pets," Arka hissed adamantly, praying to Ar for his protection.

Kimbaru found himself aroused by the fear in the eyes of his new plaything. He wondered what these people knew of such a lifestyle, of slaves traded in the southern lands for the merriment and pleasures of their masters. He had not thought himself a man of such perversions for the longest time, preferring the supple but mature body of Ramona and others of her gender over the sating of desires by mere boys in chains. Then again, he was open to pleasures of all types, and he had been playing with slaves of incredibly good form of late. Rape and murder had never made him queasy; as it was, he enjoyed that aspect of warmongering. Breaking headstrong young boys might be a new form of amusement once he took the throne.

Turning to his men, he gave the signal to blow the horns and begin the march forward. While he knew he held the upper hand, he would be wary of surprises, nonetheless.



Arameni watched as the army approached them, wondering if his strategy was enough to succeed. Arme stood by his side, a presence of fiery brimstone that was as comforting as it was frightening. The chariots were ready; the highland archers split in two. Legions of soldiers from his fiefdoms stood awaiting orders. He was glad; despite the small quarrels between the lords during the days of peace, war had a way of pulling everyone together to ensure a cohesive army for the crown. His system of governance might not be plausible for all nations, but it had worked well for his

people as they automatically filled their roles. Many a man would be rewarded after this battle, he thought, scanning the tense faces of those around him. Loyalty and a lifetime of military service deserved a monarch's gratitude and the land which came with it. Smiling as he thought of his wife's joy in joining him for these meetings, Arameni vowed once again to triumph.

"We are known to win through strategy alone, correct?" Arme spoke from beside him, his long dark hair plaited with red leather, the warrior's look. His helmet was one that Arameni had specially commissioned, the design the result of his wife's fantastical mind.

"Yes, so long as we drive them away from the open terrain. We always do best on mountains and hills. This region is too flat. It has no cover, no way to protect oneself. Kimbaru must have known Shaba was like the deserts he adores. Arkesh is no better. I would rather not cause even more destruction to this old settlement."

"Hayisi mentioned the gods were always closest to the Priestesses of Arkesh," Arme responded, never breaking his gaze from the battlements.

Smiling, Arameni hoped the ghosts of the blessed would protect them on this day as well. "The gods favor us then."

"I hope their favor outweighs that of the gods of the barbarians. If they have gods, that is."

"I doubt creatures such as Kimbaru worship anything at all."

"Perhaps. But never underestimate the strength of the enemy." Arme's words were grim, followed by a heavy silence.

The king was glad to have his brother by his side, still in awe of the man's stature and prowess. Human or not, they were bound by blood, and once this was all over, he would ensure Arme always had a place by his side. Thanking the gods for blessing him with a family he could keep close, he scanned the horizon, watched the enemy splinter, and brought up his hand as if to feel the wind. He suddenly bent at the wrist, his middle finger raised to the heavens while the rest remained straight ahead. The signal for the chariots

to attack. The commander leading the charge before him seemed to burn with a bright fire as searing as the sun itself, despite the light golden skin and deep golden strands trailing behind. He crept forward with his battalions, each of which was ten chariots wide and ten chariots long.

The Hayaran forces broke into a war cry, amplified by the wind instruments that had become tradition. Scattered among the troops were the drummers, and suddenly the ground shook with the dance that marked the start of the battle. Hand in hand, the soldiers stepped to a rhythm which brought them forward; each movement, each point and pause of the leather boots part of an ancient cadence. The drumming suddenly increased in the background as the mountainous terrain echoed each beat, each wail of the zurna, until the whole of the southern region was singing their songs. Women sang from the villages in encouragement, men sang from the battlefield, pledging their allegiance to their lands. The king rode before them and cried out, with Arme by his side. The horse neighed as he galloped in a line before them; phalanxes equipped with their spears, pikes, axes, and sickle swords creating a wall of soldiers, one which would be difficult for the enemy to break through as they moved in tandem with their lighter hourglass shields. Arameni would use them to break through the tougher enemy lines. First, he would inspire them.

"Today, I am not only your king but your kin! I ride with you to stop this madness, to protect our wives and children, born and unborn, from the brutality of the invading hordes! You have known me as your peacekeeper, and you have known me to be merciful. Today, I am none of those things! I ride before you to stop an invasion intent on destroying all that we have known. The gods have warned us about this. Ar has burned bright, and Haya has donned a mask of red. Do we deserve the gods who protect us, love us, and favor us with their goodness? Tonight is the red moon. Blood will be spilled today. How we respond to the enemy will define us. This is where we put a stop to the carnage! This is where we fight! And by the gods that are holy and merciful, this is where they die!"

The speech was met with a roar; the drumbeat increased in tempo and Arameni turned to the enemy with fire in his eyes. None noticed the pure gold turn to amber in the *dakhanavar's* gaze.

Kimbaru's forces had not been expecting the traditions of war nor the might with which the Hayarans roared, shifting confusedly as the commanders tried to gauge Arameni's plans. Sensing a break in their enemy's concentration, the king redirected the chariots to attack from the flanks, crossing the wide river that Kimbaru seemed to have mistaken for safe ground. He could not have known its shallow nature, unlike Arameni, who used this information to his advantage as he hollered orders to his men; war horns signaled once, twice, or thrice to direct the path the soldiers should take. It was as if a thousand charioteers swallowed the enemy as they rounded on those unlucky enough to be placed furthest from the core, long spears in hand as they approached for close combat. The splinter caught by the attack was left defenseless within minutes, Kimbaru noticing this defeat too late.

Even from a distance, Arameni could make out the commander's frustration. Smirking lightly, the king pushed his elite forces forward, ready to meet the central portion of the enemy army with the brunt of his attack.

"Arme, come with me!"

"Right behind you, Brother!"



This was the battle to end it all. The skirmishes Artash and Artasa were taking care of were nothing compared to this one; Arme felt it in his heart. The tension was palpable. The sun beat down on them without mercy, as if Ar himself were willing to burn the world. Just as the thought entered his mind, a fire erupted among the ranks of the enemy, leading to mass hysteria.

"Almighty Ar," exclaimed the king as he moved into position to

slice his sword through the enemy now bent on fleeing the area where blazing infernos seemed to appear out of nowhere. "What in Ar's name caused it?"

Arme struggled to understand this himself, wondering if the gods were physically aiding their children. It was an unexpected twist to the day and one which inspired the Hayaran side to fight with greater vigor.

Looking to his left, he noticed the chariots had skewered the barbarians as they attacked in beautiful formation, rounding north before crashing through enemy shields. The highland archers had managed to circle around the primary battle, shooting arrows into the thicket of the enemy. It rained black metal as Kimbaru's men scampered about, trying to shield themselves from the deadly onslaught. The cavalry had sprung into action, moving in from the western front, their booming war cries striking fear into the hearts of the southern nomads. Though their techniques were impeccable, Kimbaru's army was well trained for combat. Both sides were going strong, the clash of bronze, sharpened wood, obsidian, and the occasional steel a deadly image of beauty. Spears pierced through armor; swords hacked at heads. Some lacked the proper shield or protective clothing, leaving too much exposed skin available to maim. The sun made its way across the sky while the cavalry charged, the archers reached into their quivers for the final few arrows, and the spearmen cried out in song-like fashion with each strike and each parry; the deadly dance of ancient dragons.

A newly arrived division of the southern army was immediately disarmed as the Hayaran chariots circled around them, the men scattering in panic, some trying to flee, while others did their best to reach Kimbaru. Arameni's men were used to quick strikes, and while they broke through the central shield surrounding the commander's battalions, they suddenly found themselves struggling. They started strong but had to keep up the momentum. As the moments stretched on, none knew for sure how long they had been fighting; dusk was fast approaching, however—and any of the men not already dead—were growing weary.

Allied contingents arrived in force, having been sent ahead of the nobles, galloping toward the battleground, cutting through the nomad soldiers with ease. The packed heavy phalanx relied on its training among mountainous terrain as the barbarians fell before them. They pushed forward, using the element of surprise to their advantage once again, if only for a brief time. The chariots were too slow for prolonged warfare, and the archers were running out of arrows.

"For Hayara!"

The screams around the battlefield were deafening. The dead on the ground too many. Stakes were high for both attacker and defender, and neither was about to go down without taking a few others with him.

The upper hand was no longer theirs, and as the momentum began to wane, Arme knew they needed to do something to bolster their men. Just as the thought took form, another ferocious blaze split through the battlefield. The barbarians had used sheer numbers to force the charioteers to slow, mixing large groups of both armies, causing casualties on both sides as the fire struck.

"Almighty Ar!"

Arme could barely keep up with the fury of action around him. Trying to center himself, he concentrated on where the king was galloping through columns of fire burning those around him alive. Friend or foe, he did not know anymore.

"Brother, keep your eyes on the commander!"

A sense of hopelessness crashed through Arme as he battled against the scenes unfolding, the limbs torn asunder, and the pain which permeated the battlefield searing his heart. It appeared as if the gods had forsaken them after all, and none were destined to survive this massacre. The sound of the king's orders over the chaos that ensued around him was a balm to his ears. Thanking Ar for his ability to tune out the worst of the piercing cries of burning men and skewered bodies, the clash of weapons and blood which drenched the earth so red that there was no trace of the once lush

grounds of green and gentle sands of brown, he felt a fire rise within him. Zeroing in on his target, the inferno increasing in intensity around him, Arme pushed his mount forward while circumventing the piles of corpses in his path. There, across from his perch, was the commander of all this death. He stood alone, no officer by his side, not even a shield bearer. He was ripe for the picking and Arme was ready to end this, for king and country.

What Arme had not noticed, however, despite his supernatural senses, was the arrow aimed at his king by a lithe warrior almost detached from the rest of the fighting. Startled, he forced himself to turn from his target, only to realize the warrior beneath the cloak was a woman, and, as he had been charging toward the commander, she had broken away, aimed, and let loose a deadly strike.

Time seemed to slow to a standstill in the moments that followed. The fires raged around him. His clothing began to melt away, revealing the one sign that all knew too well. The Dark Prince, their weapon of destruction, was their crown prince. As his heart slowed in tandem with the time, the skies appeared to darken, bleeding a red color as the sun nearly set. Quickly changing direction, Arme raced toward the king, toward the brother he had loved so dearly all his life but known for only a short while as his own. He watched in desolate fascination as the arrow sliced cleanly through the man's smaller frame, piercing armor and skin alike, and embedded into the ground. Eyes widened in horror, arms flailed at his sides. The pain overtook the shock, and as Arme raced to catch him, the king of a great nation fell to the ground with a thud.

"Brother!" A heart-wrenching cry from the hulking dark man was enough to stop those around him in their tracks. Around them, the air turned silent as the entirety of the situation registered. The king had fallen. The Dark Prince was alive and somehow seemed to emit a fiery aura. The blaze around the warriors from both sides appeared to be roasting them alive. Blast after blast, the fires erupted. Friend or enemy, the lines had blurred. Arme was ignorant to all which occurred around him, swooping down and grabbing Arameni lying listlessly on scorched land. The flames licked at his

body here and there, but he shielded the king with all he had, gritting his teeth against the pain. He pushed his mount to move as fast as it could, taking them out of harm's way. It would not do to show off his abilities at the moment. He would do that once they were out of sight.

"I will get you out of here."

"Arme..."

"I promise I will protect you."

The hoof beats strangely loud in his mind, Arme tuned out the surrounding battle, effortlessly slicing those who dared try to obstruct their path into ribbons of human flesh. Some even suddenly combusted into flames, a fact unregistered by the hulking *dakhanavar* in the heat of the moment.

"My wife, my child..."

Fighting down a fury that threatened to consume him, Arme wondered once again why the gods had forsaken them. Why couldn't he, the chosen warrior, the monster in human skin... why had he been unable to protect all that he held dear? Without Arameni, with Artash and Artasa away from the battle, they stood no chance.

"Save Hayadusta! Arme, promise me..."

"You will live; you will rule!" Arme's beastly growl drowned the weak demands of his king. As Arameni coughed, Arme finally noticed the blood.

Swallowing back curses he knew would not be well received by the man he held to his body with one hand, the other tightened on the reins as the mayhem of weapons and human destruction of the battlefield gave way to a more peaceful setting.

Finding a relatively safe place to stop and check the worst of their wounds, Arme pulled his brother behind a pile of rocks, which served as the perfect vantage point to keep watch from. His senses dulled from the pain and shock, he did not know how long they lay

there; it took a clearly amused voice behind them to realize they were not alone.

"I think I will kill you both, and put an end to Hayara's Royal Family," a voice cackled behind him.

Pulled out of his reverie, with the terror of loss etched over his features, Arme turned to find the enemy commander trotting toward him. Looking around, he realized he had managed to bring Arameni well out of the way of the flames. The sun was setting as they clashed and now the darkness was almost entirely upon them. His sight was a great deal better than that of others, so he knew it was the commander that had followed them to their current position; he did not dare reveal this particular advantage, however.

Growling at the darker-skinned barbarian, he propped his brother against a boulder and stood to full height as the man approached. He was now clearly visible to the human eye.

"You will die here, heathen!"

"Interesting, your eyes glow in the dark," murmured Kimbaru.

This was news to the prince as he tried hard not to lower his lids to keep up the pretense of normalcy. Instead, they narrowed in a glare, which startled the man before him.

"You are no normal man, Dark Prince."

"How do you know who I am?"

"I do believe you screamed out 'Brother' as you turned away from our confrontation. I was so looking forward to our fight, too. It always is a pleasure to cut off the head of the dragon. Even so, that mark clears up the confusion."

"The mark?"

"I may have sent in a few spies to gather as much information as possible about this land," shrugged Kimbaru, apparently unfazed by the gold that now fully engulfed the rather insightful orbs of the royal he faced off with. Arme tried not to think about the life seeping out of the king.

"It matters not what you know."

"Of course not. As we speak, my son has the queen in his sights."

Gasping, Arameni tried to stand. "Hayadusta is in danger?"

"She was always in danger, I would assume," Kimbaru drawled.

"That boy. The Fonecian." Arme knit his brows in consternation, dread trickling through his entire being. He was charged with protecting the queen and her unborn child. He had to dispatch of this enemy and get the king to safety, but he also had to hurry to the queen's side. It was not a situation one would envy.

Grinning gleefully, Kimbaru now had the answers he needed. Kaydeh had indeed infiltrated the royal court. Whether as guest or prisoner, he was there; and that meant he would bring him the queen on a silver platter. The commander's victory was secure. Ramona had been right. Getting all that he wanted was almost easier than he had imagined it to be. He just wondered about the inferno both armies were trying to avoid as they battled to the death. "Tell me, Prince, were those fires your doing?"

"My doing?" Arme looked genuinely confused.

Equally perplexed, Kimbaru looked at the warrior's skin. No marks were left, though it was clear the fire had touched him.

"You're not burnt..."

"What are you stating, exactly?"

Giving voice to his inner turmoil, Kimbaru nodded. "You've been magically modified. You're not human?"

"What is it to you?" Arme spat. Standing at the ready, the next moves should have been expected. He attacked with all his might, knocking Kimbaru off his horse. As the commander stared dumbfounded from his perch on the ground, desperately trying to dodge the blade aimed at his neck, Arme grabbed at him. As he rolled away from the lashing blade, the *dakhanavar* turned to his strength and raised Kimbaru over his head before throwing him to the ground. He allowed honed reflexes to take over, and there was

an immediate roll forward the moment his nape touched the dirt beneath him. His turn to counter the attack, Kimbaru realized too late that his sword was lying a ways from him, closer to the creature. A flying kick landed against Arme's abdomen instead, winding.

Reaching for his weapon, Kimbaru thrust while the prince rolled to the side, and the two clashed, parrying and bending to the other's might.

"Do you feel your power draining yet?" He laughed as Arme's eyes widened. Kimbaru knew that due to Ramona's proximity and strangely honed abilities, each strike would feel as if the ground itself were pulling the magic out of his adversary. The night had set by then, the moon red and weeping in the sky. There was no breeze, not a single stir in the air around them. The fires still burned not too far away.

Cocking his head, he tried to imagine the thoughts of the creature before him. The screams of the dying pierced his ears, without a doubt. The hardest of all was the gurgling of the king, as he choked on his own blood. None of the other lords had yet arrived to help the king's contingent, and their people were being slaughtered on the battlefield. It was truly glorious.

Suddenly, something snapped into place in his adversary's mind. Using an exorbitantly large amount of his failing strength, Arme leaped backward, away from his spar with the commander. The further he moved, the straighter he stood. Then he noticed her—the shadow warrior with the arrow aimed at his brother once more. Loyalty replaced his need for self-preservation, as Arme moved at lightning speed, the arrow lodging into his arm instead of his brother's heart.

"So noble," Kimbaru clapped.

He was not sure how to respond when Arme let out an otherworldly howl. Wondering if the beast would run with the king, he watched the struggle of the mind taking place. That struggle was replaced with a full battle the moment Ramona moved

forward.

For his part, Arme wasn't sure why he had not fled with his brother yet. As he decided to protect before returning for the kill, he felt a spell woven around him. It was a dark power, one which licked him on the insides, searing pain spreading through his body. A beast appeared in his mind, one he had to combat against with his light. It was a bull-like being which oozed white acid, burning him in a manner the fire never could. Closing his eyes, he tried to ward off the hold this creature had over him. As he clenched his fists and gritted his teeth, Kimbaru and the shadow warrior watched in awe as fire seemed to engulf the Dark Prince in a cleansing warmth.

"Ramona?"

"The gods protect him, my lord."

"So, it appears. Is this beast our phoenix?"

Shaking her head, she looked as if trying to decipher something. "He is important, but not the legendary creature. The phoenix will be real, I believe. That was how it appeared in my visions."

"Your visions?" Arme felt ready to pounce, to kill and destroy. It was as if a beast truly had been unleashed within him.

"We need to kill them."

Smirking, Kimbaru raised his sword of mixed ore, one of the first of its kind. Unsurprisingly, it was a Hayaran merchant he had taken the weapon from. Exceptional quality; he had been aching to try out its might. Swinging it against the man within the fire, he was suddenly repelled by magic he had not expected. The blade began to melt, an impossible feat on its own, considering its nature.

Ramona stepped in to try to corrupt the power protecting the royals in an attempt to defend her commander before the fire lashed out at him as well. As she began speaking ancient spells, a vision appeared before her and breaking her concentration. It was one of gentle moonlight and soft silver, resurrecting memories long buried in the sands of time.

"Hayisi," she whispered with a slight stutter.

"Traitor," the apparition smiled eerily.

Anger surged through her veins with such speed and might; the pain of her past, the guilt of turning away from her goddess, the years of hatred, of twisted pleasures and darkness she would never be able to escape, all fueled her attack against the woman she once called kin.

"Your boy did not come," the apparition spoke, easily deflecting an attack meant to kill.

"How did you know about him?" She ground out the words, feeling the effects of her power directed back at her. Hayisi's had grown over the past decades, while Ramona's had long since waned. What little she had left would easily best a human, but not the High Priestess of the gods.

Smiling almost benevolently, Hayisi held out a hand. "Come back home."

"Where is Kaydeh?" Both Ramona and Kimbaru asked in unison. Kimbaru was looking slightly discomfited with this conversation, but he had long wondered about the origins of the mysterious red-haired vixen that warmed his bed. Now, it was clear her entire appearance was merely an illusion. Her loyalty to the commander and his ward was not to be doubted, however. He knew she would sooner die than turn on them.

"With a knife to the queen's throat," Hayisi sighed. Turning to the *dakhanavar*, she admonished. "How dare you leave her unattended?"

In that moment, he won against the beast terrorizing his mind, one radiating with an evil that man would never be able to fathom. The disturbing white bull's dissipation brought an anguished cry to Ramona's lips. Her features appeared drawn, and her body nearly crumpled as the fire of the gods burned away the manifestation of her beastly powers.

"Hayisi..." The name came out as a croak.

Arme was as if an avenging god, the fire still radiating around him before it slowly disappeared.

"You freed yourself without my help," she smiled almost proudly, to Ramona's dismay.

Arme tried to stand, panting with his exertions and gritting his teeth against the pain in his arm.

"What was that?"

"An original evil. Something that should not be able to appear, let alone be used as a weapon, without the sacrifice of great power. When evil mates with a fallen priestess, she is given certain control over its materialization in an individual's mind. It appears my kin has certainly gone astray."

"Kin?"

"No matter about that. I believe you have already forgotten about the queen," she drawled before adding. "Once again."

"The queen?" Both brothers croaked at once. Arme looked deep into the eyes of his maker, seeing beyond her words. Ramona understood the undercurrent—the queen would have a knife slit her throat if he did not arrive in time.

Torn, he began shifting the king, when Hayisi raised a hand. "He will not live. I will see to his burial. Your makeshift bandage has done little to stave the blood loss. He was a dead man the moment the arrow pierced him."

"No!" Crying out in anguish, Arme desperately tried to will life into his king. Arameni smiled at his brother's efforts, placing a weakened hand on his arm, fingers barely moving on the firm muscles of the brother he had hardly known. Blood had stopped pouring from the wound caused when Arme had shielded him. Angrily realizing the arrow was still lodged in his arm, the prince pulled it out with a roar, sending droplets of blood splattering over the place where they rested. Ramona and Kimbaru had been frozen in place, whether by magic or their own mind's inability to grasp all that which was occurring.

As the droplets fell to the ground, a barrier erupted, allowing Arme to escape just as Ramona found her bearings and reach for another arrow from her quiver. With an unearthly howl, knowing Hayisi's intervention had saved him but left his brother there to die, Arme leaped through the air, moving with incredible speed toward the fortress city where he knew the queen was sequestered, thinking herself safe, praying for her people's safety.

Later he would learn how Kimbaru's troops had annihilated their armies, the massive chariot battle the largest documented in the land's history. The enemy would charge forward, destroying the forces that had striven to protect the peaceful world of Hayara. It had taken six charges, but the Hayarans were surrounded; without their king to lead them or even inspire hope, the survivors pinned against the riverbed were forced to resort to swimming while praying they would make it through the sudden onset of rapids that had grown stronger as the night wore on. Many drowned as they tried to get across. While Hayara's warriors were well-bred and trained for battle, they were no match against the wild determination of the nomad forces bent on conquering a fertile nation. That night, Kimbaru would bring Hayara to her knees.

Chapter Twenty-One

Power



Watching the Dark Prince escape, knowing he was headed for the queen, Kimbaru decided to allow events to play out. The king lay bleeding to death, wheezing as it quickly became clear he would die in agony. Strangely, that did not give Kimbaru any pleasure. He had expected to relish the moment the enemy slipped into oblivion, but he found himself wanting to help keep him alive instead. This was the King of Hayara, the wealthiest, and seemingly noblest of nations in the entirety of the region. A formidable foe, indeed. He had certainly proven his worth on the field. The tactics utilized were those of a commander who knew both his land and his people well. It reminded him of the valor the Fonecians had shown in war. He had always felt a slight twinge when remembering battles past. Strange. More than the king leaning against his rock, however, it was the silver woman shining as softly bright as the moon that held his fancy. What's more, she and Ramona had a past, even relations. The thought was not as discomfiting as he expected.

"I would like an explanation here..." Hardening his voice, Kimbaru ensured the women understood he was still the commander and his army had already devastated the majority of the Hayaran forces. All he had to do was rid himself of the traveling

factions, slit the queen's throat if Kaydeh did not beat him to it as per this woman's words, and give the pathetic king a rather glorious execution should he live long enough for it. He would then rule for so long, he would probably die with a belly full of fine wine and a whore beneath him at the ripe old age of eighty summers.

The eerily familiar priestess gave him a small smile. "The gods concede defeat, only to come back stronger for the win."

Narrowing his eyes, he scoffed. "More riddles. I could easily run you through, Priestess."

"Yes, but would you?" Her smile never changed; her eyes were cold as ice. Kimbaru felt almost afraid. What powers did these priestesses possess, exactly?

To make his point clear, Kimbaru approached, sword in hand. Hayisi did not flinch. The nearer he came, the colder he felt. He lowered the blade and decided to play with his prey first. The moment the sword touched her dress, it seemed to freeze over—much to his amazement. It had already contacted the fire of the Dark Prince. The edges were certainly not as perfect as they had been. Fire and ice, Kimbaru mused as he watched the frost crawl up the steel. How intriguing. How frightening.

"You hold power. I wonder, will every priestess I face in this country be of the same caliber?"

Her smirk was answer enough, he supposed.

With narrow eyes, he appraised his adversary. "The king has passed out cold, woman. I suggest making your intentions clear before he dies a rather unseemly death."

"I ask that you respect my position, Commander. Should you not, I will not allow you access to the throne. Whether or not the king is dead." Her piercing gaze was enough to send shivers down his spine. Up close, he realized she was blind. Somehow, that was even more daunting.

"What monstrosity are you?" he snarled, taking a step back and trying to make sense of the situation. His generals were probably

worried about him; he should get back. However, looking at this woman, he felt as if he could not move away. She had woven a web around him, like moonbeams trapping the night.

"Interesting question. Assuming you are referring to my lack of human sight, I will concede a few truths. It was lost protecting a child. My mortality was an equal sacrifice when I brought the same child to the altar of the gods. You have entered a land you know little to nothing about; we are not simple people like those in the desert states. Furthermore, I am not a damsel in distress. I have lived through many events and will be here for many more yet. I serve only the goddess. My life was forfeit to the gods long ago."

Ramona's sharp intake of breath was not lost on either party.

"You gave up mortality?" Her question was a surprised whisper on the wind, startling him with its reverence.

"Yes. Through death I was reborn, and so was he." Her smile was evanescent. It was humbling, and Kimbaru wondered at the stricken expression on his woman's face.

He had also had enough of this talk. "What do you want, Priestess?"

"Do you truly wish to celebrate your victory?"

"No, I would rather prefer returning to vast deserts, if you do not mind," he drawled lazily, the sarcasm not lost on the women before him. "I repeat, your king has lost consciousness."

"Yes, I realized," she replied daintily. It seemed as if she knew what the commander planned for the fallen king. Kimbaru frowned at the veiled intensity in her voice.

Deciding he'd rather not see the king die just yet, he nodded toward Ramona. Understanding the commander's message, she moved toward the man who once rode radiant and free, now crumbled upon the ground. Her arrow had nearly snuffed out the child of Ar. It seemed like a small mercy to take his life now, where none could witness his passing. Kimbaru had other designs, however. He watched as she gave him a healing touch, closing the

wound and stemming the internal bleeding to keep him alive long enough for her sadistic lover to decide the man's fate. Kimbaru turned his gaze to the silver priestess at the right moment, witnessing the pain etched on her initially cool and collected features. Yes, she had been stalling for time, to see the king fade from existence. She would have given him a glorified death, where the people would weave heroic tales to exalt the deeds of a monarch they had long admired. Instead, Kimbaru meant to humiliate.

"You will not kill him," she suddenly commanded in a tone that brooked no argument.

Seeing red, his earlier wariness dissipated, Kimbaru ignored the icy feeling and grabbed Hayisi by the neck. "You dare dictate what the conqueror does in his conquered lands?"

"I dare state that as the messenger of the Divine Goddess protecting these lands, you shall not take another step forward without my permission," she bit back, an unnatural smile on her lips.

Taking a step forward, he pushed her to the ground. "Frail woman, you can do nothing," he sneered.

Caught unawares, he felt his heart slow as if an icy hand had gripped it, tightening its hold. "By giving up my life, I obtained the power of the goddess herself. Do not test me, Boy."

"Boy?" He hissed, desperately clawing at his chest. His heart felt so cold he could not tell whether it still pumped blood.

"Yes, would you like me to spare your life?"

With gnashing teeth, he glowered without a word, the frozen pain within him beyond unbearable. Moments passed—it felt like an eternity.

"Please..."

Shocked at the whispered plea, Ramona shot a look at the man that near dangled in the air. Dread and pain locking his limbs as he uttered the unutterable, he merely wished to live in that moment.

The woman would see his revenge later.

"Hayisi..."

"Yes, my blood?"

"Let him go."

"What are you saying?"

"Please," Ramona begged.

"Let the king live."

"You know it is impossible."

"You cannot be the one to kill him," Hayisi hissed.

Stunned by the vehemence in her voice, Ramona looked to Kimbaru for guidance. As he nodded, she complied. "He will not die by my hands, nor the commander's."

"He will not die."

"We cannot allow him to live, Hayisi."

"Find a way. My magic is at hand if you become creative enough for it. He must not die," she stated, each syllable punctuated clearly.

When Ramona seemed at a loss for words, Hayisi muttered, "Ar favors him."

The words pierced the former priestess, stinging her eyes with unshed tears. She understood.

"What does that mean?" His growl put Ramona on edge.

"The gods are careful about choosing their children. While all view the gods as their spiritual parents, the priestesses know which mortals are destined for greatness."

It was why she had led Kimbaru on this path, he realized. He was but a pawn in testing the boundaries of that greatness. She would need to stay him off this course. The gods had willed it, whether he believed in them or not.

"You will be sentencing him to a lifetime of misery," he heard

her say as he tried to make sense of their words.

"Yes," Hayisi whispered.

"As you will it, High Priestess," Ramona bowed her head before turning to Arameni. Her spells would keep the pain away for the time being as the fallen king rested. She would take him on her mount, away from prying eyes. If they were to succeed in keeping him alive without hurting Kimbaru's ascent to the throne, she would have to hide him far away from civilization and just as far from memory.

Finally free of the death grip, Kimbaru eyed the silver-haired beauty with disdain and a sudden rush of awe. Never had he felt such power. The gods of this land would have to be respected if he hoped to rule. Reports stated there were many a priestess, but only a select few held the powers reserved for those directly in connection with the goddess. Typically, this was passed down the generations. He had an inkling his rather perverse Ramona was closely related to this witch before him. A good long chat was overdue with the wily woman once he completed his mission, once Hayara was entirely his own.

"Your name is Hayisi, Priestess?"

Turning her back to them both, she began to walk away. "You may call me Priestess, High Priestess, or Haya Incarnate. No other name would be acceptable," she threw back.

"Of course, Priestess. Tell me one thing, however, before you disappear on us. Why do you allow this to occur if you hold the power to prevent it?"

"The gods will it. When the phoenix rises, you will begin the countdown to the day you lose it all again."

Eyes widening, Kimbaru made to grab her hand as she disappeared. An illusion? He knew he had touched her before, felt the ice within him, and pushed her even. It made no sense.

Dread in his heart, he looked to Ramona for clarification. Anger and fear mixed. "Kill him. I will not allow that man to live!"

Shutting her eyes against the intensity of his bellowing, she responded. "If you do, you will be struck down in an instant."

When she reopened them, her gaze was unlike anything he had seen in all the time they had been together. It fueled the rage within him as he struck her hard, sending her flying backward. Her crumpled form continued to glare daggers at him. Kimbaru had never been so overcome with emotion as he was in that moment.

"No god would dare strike me down!"

"They already have," she whispered as she watched his arm weaken.

The sudden loss of ability in his muscles so clearly terrified the commander that he fell to his knees, crying out.

"Ramona!" His words echoed through her heart. There was so much desperation in that single word, she was rendered speechless. Her gods, the gods she had long forsaken, were very much still present in these lands.

"This is no power of a priestess, my lord," she spoke tremulously. "This is the power of Haya herself. When Hayisi brought the frost into your body, she cursed you. You will feel its grip again, sire, if you do not heed her words. She only asked the king remain alive. That should not be too hard a feat to accomplish."

"Curse the gods! This is all your doing!" He seethed, glaring at the woman who had known so much about this world yet felt it was her right to withhold it from him.

Hanging her head, she accepted the rebuke. "I was not given leave to tell you. I accept your fury, for while I may have turned from my gods long ago, the blood of a priestess flows through my veins. I cannot die, no matter how much I crave the finality of that end. It is not my time."

"Coward."

"Yes, my lord. I am a coward. Also, I am yours to do with as you wish at this moment. I will concede one point, however. Should I

die, your reign will be shorter than you realize."

The standoff between the two, as she dusted herself off without moving her gaze from his, was so charged, Kimbaru was almost positive he heard thunder around him.

Suddenly feeling weary, he stood and walked away. "I have no more need of your services, my lady. Please return to your goddess."

"You think it is that easy?" Ramona allowed hysterical laughter to ring out; the tension between them was so thick she could almost touch it. With the fighting dying down around them, their spat had caught the attention of Kimbaru's men, a few of which began making their way over. Seeing this, Ramona quickly threw the king onto her horse and expertly swung herself onto the saddle. "Remember this, my lord. I am the reason you were allowed to enter these lands without the full interference of the gods. My place is by your side, and your destiny is to rule Hayara, at least for some time. Your destiny is also to fall protecting your claim. As my visions heralded and as the High Priestess confirmed, the phoenix will rise. Now, I will do what you have been too afraid to face. I will take this king, revered by all, into a most desolate place, far from human reach. I will use my magic to keep him alive, but I will ensure he will never leave his stony prison. I will tell you about all I have done only after I come back, at which point I will find you on the obsidian throne."

With that sudden outburst, Ramona kicked her stallion's flank and disappeared into the darkness. The stench of death permeated the air, as her departure brought with it the rains, and lightning finally struck. The clouds covered the red moon, the fires in the distance died down to mere embers, and the battlefield was cloaked in a black void of deafening silence as the conqueror looked upon the field of carnage.



Artash arrived just as Artasa's and Arzawa's forces reached the battlefield as well. Before them was a wall of fire, however, and the battle was already long underway. As the men tried to make sense of the situation, one thing was clear: it was nearly impossible to tell who was friend and who was foe in the chaos before them. Red embers in dark smoke burned at the touch, with those not falling to the swing of a sword, succumbing to the suffocating fumes that enveloped the region.

Wide-eyed and confused, Artasa looked to the skies where the clouds swirled ominously.

"Father! The gods!"

One by one, each man in his respective regiment lifted his eyes skyward, taking in a sharp breath as they realized what it meant. The swirls had aligned strangely, but the mark was unmistakable. The eight rays of the sun bathed in the red moonlight, bent and curved. This was the symbol they used as their sigil, the symbol burned onto the skin of the Dark Prince.

This was the symbol of the gods.

Just as they realized Ar and Haya had joined this war, silver light bathed the outskirts of the battlefield, pulling Artash's attention to a rocky clearing at the foot of a hill.

"Artasa! The king has fallen!"

Startled by these words, the former heir to the Arani throne watched in despair as fire erupted before being doused by an icy force not from their world.

"Father, this is not a battle we can win," Artasa said, jaw set grimly.

"No. This is not a battle of mortals alone, as it appears."

"What should we do?"

Arzawa, distant cousin to Arameni, was not impressed with the indecision of his fellow commanders. "We fight! We fight until our last breath, and then we fight some more!"

"Curb the fire in your eyes, Brother. This is a war of the gods!"

"I see men on that field, men who have died from both sides. I do not understand the sky nor the fires, but I will obliterate the enemy before I allow any foreigner to step onto our lands!"

With that, Arzawa rode before the battalions making up their combined army, awaiting their commands. "Your king lays dying on the battlefield, while your queen is left helpless in the castle, awaiting our news. Will you let the deaths of your brethren go to waste? Will you run because you are unsure if you can win? Look above you! The gods say we win today. Ar has sent down his fires. Who will fight with me? Who will send these primitive tribes to their graves?"

The words had their desired effect. The men thumped their shields, archers raised their bows, and a war cry resounded like never before. Artash watched with fascination as the boy smirked at him, raised the banner, and rode into the mayhem before them, not heeding the warnings Artasa called out after him.

Only a handful of loyalists had remained with the nobles. One approached Artash with confusion.

"Why do we not ride?"

"Take a look around you, General. If we are to ride, it would be into the thicket outside the battlefield where I see a clash of fire and ice." Dread in his heart, Artash stood torn as he heard howls of pain. A sudden flash left him whirling toward the direction the fiery flash headed.

"Hayadusta!"

"Father?" Startled, Artasa called out as he noticed the older man's stricken expression.

"Whatever it is, it heads toward the capital," Artash cried as he pivoted his horse back toward Aratta. As he rode away from the battlefield, he knew he was leaving their king and their soldiers to die.

Artasa followed with knitted brow. "You would leave the king at the mercy of the enemy?"

"Do not raise your voice to me, boy. If you wish to throw away your life, you are free to do so. That creature heads toward Hayadusta. If there is to be any chance of surviving this war, your sister's safety is paramount!"

Suitably chastised, Artasa held his tongue. Artash was glad to concentrate on riding as hard and as fast as possible. The horses would need rest, however, and whatever that was, it moved at lightning speed. Letting out a breath, he spotted the young informant from before.

"Boy!" He called out, gesturing for the youth to join him. "Ride ahead and signal for the others to have fresh horses ready. We make haste to the capital and must ride hard and fast. Ensure we can switch mounts by dawn and then dusk. We must make it to the queen before the enemy does, or you can be assured we do not survive the coming days."

Nodding, the boy took another route, readying the tools for the fire signals. There were four others, and the informants had already spread out, ready to relay messages. He was glad for the cover of the night. The fire signals were much easier to spot than the smoke.

Artash, positive he could trust in his youngsters, leaned low on his mount and rode harder. Patting the beautiful stallion from time to time, he tried to relay the urgency of the situation and his gratitude for the mount's understanding.

"I hope we are not too late," he muttered under his breath.

"This decision had better have been the right one."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Gods



Leaving Kimbaru behind with harsh parting words had not been her intention, but Ramona was in no mind to allow her weaknesses to show. She would go back to that obstinate man, even if it killed her. Chances were that her loyalty to the commander would finally be her undoing, but it mattered not. She knew she would have to oversee the events of the days to come. Thoughts turned to a family she had long turned her back on. Hayisi had aged considerably since she had seen the woman last; so long, Ramona only barely remembered that even as a little girl, the priestess possessed an otherworldly appeal which would both attract and frighten those who lay eyes on her. Smiling to herself, Ramona decided she was proud of the High Priestess. Her sister would have been amazed at the woman into which that unruly daughter of hers had matured.

Allowing her spell of illusion to dissipate, she embraced her true age and appearance. These lands would not be kind to a red-haired enchantress and would not understand her reasons for having a man thrown over the saddle before her. Some may even recognize the king, despite her cloaking spell. It was a slight chance, but a risk she refused to take, considering her circumstances. She would have to navigate carefully as she steadily moved toward her destination.

Leaning over to grab something from her saddlebag, Ramona decided she had best throw a blanket over her load for added protection. It was good timing, too, for the mob of villagers blocking the road before her was an unexpected obstacle. Choosing a different route would arouse suspicion, she knew, meaning she would have to school her expression going forward.

"Stay! State your name and business!" A burly villager brandished a bronze-handled obsidian blade in beefy hands. At first glance, they had appeared to be a simple bunch, but the weapons were another thing altogether.

"I am a priestess of the court with an errand to run. The borders have fallen, the king is dead. The enemy has entered Hayara!" Adding a touch of panic to an otherwise clear and commanding voice, Ramona drew from her inner reserves and brought a woman long-buried back to the forefront.

Murmurs among the people gave her halt.

"Forgive us, Priestess," one spoke up, "but we will fight! The king is not dead. None saw him die. The queen has disappeared! We believe the weapon of the gods, the Rising Phoenix, has her. We may not know all the details, but if the royals are alive, we will not give up on them! We still have hope!"

Ramona tried to keep her expression steady. Nodding, she tucked this information away, wondering at how much of it Kimbaru would know already. Best to share it, she thought. He would find out eventually. The weapon must have been the man they faced earlier; the one who defeated the white bull's hold. Deciding to try and figure out the prince's mysterious powers at a later time, she smiled lightly.

"Yes," she responded with authority. "The battle may be lost, but the war is not. So long as the people of Hayara hold on to their hope, even if summers may pass, we will regain our lands."

Cheers resounded as Ramona wondered at her little speech. She felt suddenly lightheaded, a headache forming where no problems had existed before. She would try and decipher her words once she

was through the throngs of people. Surprisingly, no one questioned the blanket-covered load she had before her, despite some men eyeing her strangely. It would be best to leave at once.

"You are right, my lady. So long as the queen is safe and with child, we know the gods have not abandoned us."

Smiling brightly now, the summers melting away from the sheer beauty of that enchanting pull at her lips, Ramona spoke words that brought a gentle emotion into her heart. Hayisi had made it clear with her speech earlier in the night that the gods were very much in power here. As the sun broke through the horizon, even a fallen priestess could appreciate the splendor Ar and Haya had bestowed upon them.

"Hear me, children, for these are the words of Haya herself. The gods you worship love you as fiercely as they love one another. Never would they forsake their children, no matter the circumstances. Sometimes, devastating events must occur; the nights must turn pitch black, the days must lose their light; everything happens so that another, greater occasion might present itself. The gods readied the nation for this catastrophe. The day will come when even this madness and misery will end. Brace yourselves for battles and war. Ready yourselves for terror. But never, ever, are you allowed to lose hope, to lose your faith in our Mother and Father in the skies above."

Not a single sound could be heard as she came to from her sudden vision. Something within her had stopped. What had she said, she wondered? Ramona hated these visions. At times, it was impossible to remember all the bits and pieces. This time, she could barely make out what she must have muttered in a manner so incomprehensible, those around her stood frozen in astonished awe.

"Haya..."

Eyes widening, Ramona tried not to think about such a thing. Did Haya speak through her? Impossible! There was hope in their eyes though, and that, she knew, was precisely what the Goddess

wanted. So long as Kimbaru ruled these lands, they would need to tread carefully where the deities were concerned.

Nodding to the people, realizing most had sheathed their knives and lowered their weapons, Ramona looked ahead of her. Starting at a walk, leaning forward for a trot, and then pushing the horse to a full gallop, she was surprised to see them part enough to let her through. No more questions followed her, no more doubt. None suspected her to be a traitor. As she made her way into the deserted clearing, she wept.



Hayisi arrived at the High Temple of Haya, greeted by her eager granddaughter. While the child within her shone clear and strong, there was a glimmer of a woman within her already. Hayimi knew she had grown much and had seen more than her paltry few summers of life should have allowed. As the High Priestess breezed past the solemn face pensively watching her every move, it was clear she failed to notice the worry radiating from the usually boisterous youth.

"Nani?"

It was a whisper in the wind. Stepping forward to touch the weathered arm gently, Hayimi realized the priestess had made one more sacrifice to ensure her hold on the usurper heading toward the throne. The sightless eyes seemed a little too dull, lacking in the warmth to which the younger priestess had become so accustomed.

Hayimi decided to mind-speak. "You are unable to hear me, Nani?"

The older woman nodded with a sorrowful expression, accepting her fate. Thrice she had called upon the powers of Haya, and each time she had given up something in return. Arme had always been the cause, Hayimi thought, though watching the events unfold in the older priestess's mind, she had to admit this

latest trial had little to do with the Dark Prince. Her life was forfeit the moment she realized the more profound connection she had with Haya; both knew this. It did not make losing precious human abilities any less tragic or terrifying.

While Hayimi watched powerlessly, Hayisi's thoughts turned to the images of her mother's sister, a woman long deemed lost to the world. She had shed her youthful appearance and now rode with the king before her protected from prying eyes under a blanket of sorts, her long white hair flowing in the wind as she galloped into the mountains. There were legends of beastly gods within those regions toward the north, and it was clear the rider believed it to be the safest place for an undead king to reside. It would take days for her to arrive at her destination, so far up into the mountain chain none would ever find him. Hayisi smiled as she realized this was a creative solution to a somewhat unexpected problem. A king chained in the mountains, the magic of the gods keeping him alive. There would be game enough for him to eat, but he would spend the rest of his days in utter misery, held back from all that he held dear.

She only hoped Haya understood the suffering she inflicted on her children by not allowing the king a clean death. It mattered not. The goddess still protected and favored the fallen priestess, and the barbaric commander was not struck down. Instead, he had been allowed the spoils of his conquest. The land was his.

Hayimi felt the emotions emanating from her mentor and tried to drink in the images which appeared in her mind. It was clear Haya would feel her children's misery for many summers to come.

The prophecy was unfolding. The fire had burned bright; the man that stood in the midst of it all had stolen the queen away, and the child was yet to be born. Sighing as she wiped at her tears, sliding unbidden down pale cheeks, Hayimi looked toward the sky. The dawn had broken beautifully. All appeared as peaceful as it had been days before. However, there was a moon in the sky today. The sun and the moon stood side by side, watching their nation crumble. Strangely, not a single cloud passed above them as

Hayimi mused about the mysterious nature of their creators before embracing the embodiment of the Mother before her.

"Nani, remember that the phoenix will rise. The bells shall hearken the coming of a savior, a child of Haya herself. The pain of the moment is but a temporary one. We shall see the sun and the moon together once more, this time bringing good omen."

Despite her loss of hearing, the words appeared in her mind with the strength in the voice uttering them rumbling through the elder. She was grateful for such telepathy. Hayisi turned in her granddaughter's embrace and allowed the child to finally see the tears that fell. Tears of mourning, of loss, of abject terror over all that their people would have to suffer at the hands of a tyrant with perverse pleasures and an unstable heart.

"Something is not right..."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Usurper



Hayadusta stared into the distance from her perch atop the parapet, the stone beneath her still as beautiful as the day she arrived. The air smelled almost sweet, the light breeze bringing with it the scent of wildflowers and blooming fruit trees. The cherry blossoms were especially fragrant during this season. With summer so close at hand, the flora flourished with such beauty that it took her breath away.

Sighing once again as she tried to pull herself together, she hoped to see beyond the horizon, to where the battle waged, where the beauty had morphed into a vision of horror and charred remains instead. Her eyes stung as her belly felt so full it was impossible to think it could grow even larger; her back ached, and her limbs were swollen. Fingers had ballooned to such a point it had been over a moon span since she could wear her rings. Her bracelets, armlets and even anklets were impossible to clasp. Nearly unadorned and standing with heavy brocades showing off her status, she tried to ignore the itch from the headdress of silver, silk, and gold. It weighed too heavy on the crown of her head. She gritted her teeth against the annoyance of heavy materials and royal dress, though it was a welcome distraction from fretting over the

war in the far distance.

She found she could not keep her mind off her husband, her father and brother, and all that she held dear. Moreover, she could not stop the tears. Reddened eyes looked to the sunrise, where Ar awoke from his slumber and Haya drifted off to sleep. Cheeks chapped from the trails of salt that pulled at her skin. Her lips were dry, as if the water had drained from her body; no matter how many times she tried to quench her thirst with the sheepskin pouches full of fresh mountain water, it felt as if she was shriveling like a raisin, becoming one with a sun-dried prune. Feeling the baby kick lightly, she shifted her attention back to the life she carried within her as she tried to smile down at her unborn child, wondering if Aris would come to find her soon. Please, she begged silently, let him come with good news.

"Forgive me, little one. I have failed you. I promised you a world of wonders, but instead, I know not if you will even survive your birth, let alone the harsh conditions we might face soon enough. I swear to you this, *hokyag*. I swear by the moon and the stars in the sky that I shall always be there for you for so long as I draw breath. I will give you back your dreams and be your protector. You will never have to wonder if you are alone, for I will ensure you are forever surrounded by love. Like a shadow stuck to your side, I will be right here until death deigns part us, and even then, I will stay by you to protect against the evil eyes of man. I will love you... and so will your father, little one."

"Yes, he will, no matter where he may be," spoke a raspy voice from behind, breathing heavily as it moved closer.

Wiping at her tears frantically, Hayadusta tried to paste on a smile, though it must have appeared quite comical to earn that worried expression from the *dakhanavar*.

"Is he gone?" Her whisper carried a thousand questions.

"I cannot say for sure," he answered sadly, trying to block out the images of the night. His body was sore, and he tried to hide the grisly scar which had appeared once his arm had healed. She

noticed it and wondered what had happened. "The gods have made it clear I am to protect you and the babe."

"You left him on the battlefield?"

"I was forced to, yes."

Fury in her eyes, she rounded on him like a mother bear whose cubs had been threatened. Arme took a step back, arms raised in defeat. "You left your king, your blood, out there to die?"

Lowering his gaze at her sharp words, Arme was nearly prostrate. "My queen, allow me to take you far from the castle. The enemy will soon overrun the capital. My duty was always to keep you safe."

"Arameni is dead?" She repeated her question, willing him to offer her another response. The queen understood the rationale behind it, but forgiveness was not something she would easily give. "You left your king for dead to find me. You sacrificed your brother for a stranger!"

"Hayisi arrived in time to protect him, I believe. Even if it only to give him the burial of a beloved monarch."

Thoroughly confused by the news, Hayadusta stepped forward, her face an arm's length from his. "The High Priestess is on the battlefield?"

"Yes, my queen. I implore you to come away with me now. The boy we found was indeed a spy."

Just as he mentioned this, a rustling sound sent Arme pouncing. A brief scuffle ensued as they discovered he had tackled down the spy in question. The stealthy creature had been hiding from the moment he noticed Arme, it appeared, and the queen shuddered at the thought of what would have occurred if the larger prince had not been by her side when he was. There was a dangerous glint in those eyes, and the arm Arme had pinned down held the blade she had found a rather extraordinary piece of art less than two moon spans back.

Growling, he slapped the youth who spat back in unfettered rage.

"Kimbaru's?" Hayadusta whispered as she warily watched the interchange, hand placed protectively on the bulge of her belly.

"Yes. As you can see, his intentions were never pure."

Brows furrowed, the queen approached to pick up the dagger from where it had fallen. Examining the craftsmanship, she softened.

"Nobility."

"My thoughts exactly. I spied that blade on him the day he was caught." Turning to Kaydeh, Arme appeared menacing.

"You will never harm the queen. Understood?"

The intensity of their gazes only spurred on the queen's anger.

"Why would a member of the Fonecian nobility become a loyal minion for a miserable abomination such as the barbarian commander at our gates? You must know he was the one to wipe out your family in the first place," she huffed.

"He was not!" Hayadusta found herself intrigued by the red flush to the lad's cheeks that had nothing to do with the prince's hold.

"Truly?" She raised a brow.

Arme, who had not relaxed his arm that held onto the boy's neck, nor moved the knee that pinned him in place, looked down at the man-child with pity. "If you are Fonecian, and I am positive you are, why would a Fonecian become a spy for a bloodthirsty animal like Kimbaru?"

When the youth refused to give up any information, Arme turned to Hayadusta.

"I do not know what his motives are. However, it was clear many an individual is aiding Kimbaru. I believe an Arani priestess has gone rogue and joined hands with him. She is perhaps the reason

behind his current victory."

The strangled sound that came from the pitiful being on the ground did not go unnoticed. The queen's response, however, made him cringe.

"Victory? Hayara cannot fall in a single night!"

Shaking his head, Arme tried to make sense of it himself, noticing the small smile on the spy's lips. Just as he began choking the life out of Kaydeh, Hayadusta's alarmed scream put a stop to his murderous intent.

"You cannot kill him!"

"You would rather I invite him for a wild thyme brew?"

Finding the sheath at the boy's waist, Hayadusta confiscated the weapon. "A berry brew is more my style," she retorted as Arme stood, bringing the boy up with him.

"You order his release, my queen?"

Thinking, she watched the spy wheeze while the *dakhanavar* kept one hand against his throat, using the other to pin his hands back.

"Tell me about the war. Remind me how my country could fall in a single day, Brother." Venom dripped from her words as she tucked the dagger safely within the folds of her skirts. She insisted on pockets in all her clothes. It made it easy to move things around without using her hands, a great advantage both in spiriting away figs from the kitchens and in hiding strange daggers from the world.

"Our armies have been decimated. We attacked before waiting for your father and brother. Arzawa and his regiment were also quite a ways at the time. We were initially outnumbered, but more than that, the fires destroyed both armies."

"Fires?"

Turning away, he closed his eyes tightly. "I think I was the cause. At least Kimbaru believes this."

Growling at the youth he still held, he suddenly released his neck and pushed the boy away. Immediately, Kaydeh ran, but Arme paid him no heed. If Kimbaru had captured Hayara, it made little sense to hunt down a simple spy, particularly one who had barely reached his manhood. Arme was not in the business of killing children.

"You?" Her voice was dangerously low, the calm before the storm. She didn't even bat an eye, watching their captive escape without permission.

She grabbed at his armor, the look in those blue-green eyes wild. Arme found himself drowning in guilt, unable to save himself. He deserved her words, her fury, her hatred. He was also the only one who could protect her now. Straightening himself to full height, he grabbed her hand and pulled her close to him.

"As the priestess has mentioned so many times before, the ways of the gods are mysterious. We must bend to their will, for they know best how to guide us forward. Right now, I am tasked with your protection and the safe delivery of the babe in your womb. The prophecy is all which protects Hayara now. You are all that protects our nation. Allow me to protect you, my queen. Allow me to do that for which I was created."

"You could not protect my husband; your brother and king," she spat, but did not struggle against him. Bending as he slid an arm beneath her knees while steadying the other around her waist, he felt a touch of amusement as she let out a whoosh of breath, eyes wide and dainty fingers grabbing at him as he lifted and cradled her close.

"Kimbaru will publicly state both you and the king are dead."

Perking up, she swallowed back her anger and despair. "Does that mean Arameni might be alive? Hayisi might help him escape."

Arme shook his head as he watched the sun's rays fully envelop the sky. "It is impossible to tell, but I promise I will scour the lands and try to find any hint of him. It makes no sense, in any case. Kimbaru would not allow him to live. Nor would he give up the

chance for a public execution."

"He will not execute publicly."

"No?"

"He would want to; I do not doubt that. However, if the High Priestess was there, we might find him alive once again." There was an infectious excitement in her voice. Arme found himself hoping they had not seen the end of his brother, as well.

"Yes. She was there. She helped me escape, pushed me to come and get you. Should I have arrived a few moments later, the Fonecian would have had ample time to slice through your neck." While the sacrifice of his brother would never cease to haunt him, the hope of his survival, as well as the surety of hers now that he was here, was enough to soothe his frayed nerves, at least for the moment.

"Tell me he will live," she suddenly begged.

"I cannot," he whispered, turning away from her gaze as his arms tightened around her.

Nearly forgetting her situation, her sorrow morphed to rage once more as she howled, she moved her hand to strike the man who admitted to having arrived at the capital to save her. Arme did not try to protect himself, stilling instead and at the ready to receive the brunt of her violent response. He deserved it, he thought to himself as he closed his eyes against the inevitable blow. He should have been able to protect them both. Should it not have been for the priestess, he would have failed them all. His sacrifice had been for naught. Why had the gods created him if he would be so powerless at the moment of truth? Arme's thoughts whirled as Hayadusta brought her palm down with a hard smack, a substantial hit despite her small figure. It hurt his heart worse than it bruised his skin.

"What kind of brother are you? What kind of prince? How can the gods favor such a weakling as you?"

"I do not know..." His whisper was nearly inaudible, and the queen appeared not to hear.

"You were supposed to protect us," she cried, burying her face in his neck. Knowing the change in emotion was heavily influenced by her pregnancy's effect on the balance of the mind, he continued to hold her, his cheek smarting from her slap.

"Yes." Sensing hostile auras nearby, he nodded to her before pulling her as close as possible and launching them toward the northwest, to the mountain range nearest the sea. He made a vow as he felt her terror with each touchdown and vault to never allow this woman far from his sight.

Trying to avoid any form of civilization, Arme finally brought them to a place too rugged for most to come through. He did still fear her voice would carry far, bringing spies and unnecessary onlookers to their new home, but it was relatively safe. If they were careful, they could reside here for many a summer, raising the child. Eyes resting on her belly as she panted hard—as if she had been the one to exert herself—he thought back to his son, wondering what had become of his own family. He hoped they were safe.

Leading her into a cave he had prepared during the moon span he had been away from everyone, Arme watched as Hayadusta crumpled to the ground, and lowered himself beside her as he brushed fingers against her cheeks. Sighing in exhaustion, she allowed him to pull her into an embrace, resting her ear against his chest. He felt the rhythm that should have long ceased, according to the priestess. He wondered once again if something had gone horribly wrong in his transformation, and he was not as useful a weapon as he should have been. The drumming within him had been especially loud on the battlefield, which must have been how he was able to tap into a fire affinity he never knew he possessed. Now, it was his unshakable will to protect this noticeably fragile woman that increased the rhythm, lulling her into uninterrupted sleep. He stayed thus, relishing the warmth of her body, knowing he had at least succeeded in saving one. Two, he corrected. He had managed to save two.

"I was charged with protecting you," he murmured to himself. He was created for her, for this woman and this child that was to

come. Rocking them back and forth, he tried to console himself while fighting against an incessant bloodlust. He would have to feed soon, or he would lose his strength. Yet, he did not want to leave her alone tonight of all nights.

Arme settled her into the bed he had thrown together with the pelts of his prey when he stayed here during his days of torturous training before he found the strength to return home. Ensuring she was safe and warm, he walked away uneasily, requiring fresh blood but unwilling to leave the precious burden he had been charged with behind.

"I will be back soon, my queen," he whispered against her ear as he peppered light kisses against her temple. "I need to find the High Priestess and figure out our next steps. Perhaps she has news of our king."

Unsure how long he could leave the queen alone as he leaped into the skies, he decided his thirst could wait.



Ramona had been riding strong and free, the wind whipping through braids she now wore as custom dictated. As she neared the mountain range she had in mind—less than a fortnight into her journey, keeping up a trot that allowed her to cover longer distances during the day and only stopping for a full rest each night—the lone rider found herself checking on her unconscious load more often than not.

"You should have been more careful, my king."

Her words echoed back to her, whispers lost to the world around her.

"You have created so much in such a short time. I wonder, dear king, what it was that made you the Golden Child. Why is it your lands could prosper so? Sometimes, I am fiercely envious of your queen, who was snatched from her own world and suddenly thrust

into the role of monarch, ruling over a kingdom greater than any she had ever seen. How did you know it was her you needed? Why did you not simply follow your father's bloodthirsty footsteps? I do not understand this weakness of yours, which has somehow been deemed a strength."

Shaking her head and sighing, she continued on her journey. She knew many would find out the truth later; that their king had been taken to the lands of Arar, deep within the country, where the highest peak could be found. There, he had been imprisoned, chained, and left to die. Wild dogs would attack him, but the chains would never slacken. Perhaps this tale would exist centuries later? She wondered aloud, keeping track of the king's heartbeat. Her powers were unsteady as it was. Perhaps she should add to the legends, she mused. She'd have bards over generations tell of blacksmiths who ensured the magical chains would never break, a terrible thought, horrible suffering. Such a harrowing fate for a monarch of such integrity; sadness would taint the hearts of many in the decades and millennia to come.

She would immortalize him. No matter Kimbaru's ambitions, this she would do for the ill-fated monarch who deserved to rule. The descendants of this race would remember a king who suffered and a queen who disappeared without a trace. Ramona wondered about the whereabouts of the latter. On the way, she had heard rumors of the queen finding sanctuary with friendly clans once she had been smuggled out. It was not so hard to believe. Others swore by the gods she was still in Hayara, hidden within its vast mountain ranges, far from prying eyes. This inspired hope. She would have to speak to Kimbaru, but she knew in her heart she would not. Perhaps, one day, the king would break free of his mountainous prison, the queen would descend from her slopes with a babe at her breast, and the kingdom would be saved.

It was a tiny spark, a dream of happier times, a warm morsel for an especially chilly day.

As her thoughts turned unhealthy, her loyalties wavering with each step, she stopped to allow herself and her horse a drink.

Pulling the king to the ground with her, she brought some of the liquid to his lips. He was a little too heavy, despite his unconscious state. It was then that she noticed the lack of breath, the icy blue which tinged chapped and broken lips. Reaching trembling fingers to his collar, she searched for a pulse. Nothing. Or was that something? Picking up his wrists, she checked again. Something should be there! Putting her head to his chest, horror overtook her.

The king was fading fast, and her magic was not enough to stop the inevitable. "Haya, help me!"

PART VI

Chapter Twenty-Four

Conquerors



A severely weakened Hayara mourned the loss of its royals, with the border skirmishes pushing local factions still fighting against Kimbaru's forces further inland. It was the beginning of the summer period, where Ar scorched the lands and Haya offered balmy winds to soothe her little ones. Perhaps if it were winter, the worst of the pillage, the massacres of whole villages, the famine that became all too commonplace, would have been bypassed. Instead, the land of plenty saw some of its worst days within a short period of the conquering hordes' arrival. Many refused to give up hope, however. The king was said to be alive. The queen in labor.

Travelers spread word of Haya's appearance somewhere on the road to the north. Others said she spoke through a priestess in the

streets heading west where the sun would set each night. However, no matter what words were offered in solace, the truth was that Arameni had disappeared, and Hayadusta was nowhere to be found. The great weapon forged by the gods had proven too weak, as the man with the golden eyes and long, dark waves had vanished from their world. Whispers spread the news of the death of the royals.

Nobles who had fought dearly to protect their nation were puzzled. Should they die with honor or live with shame? The people spat on the conquerors. Kimbaru arrived in the capital settlement of Aratta, walked through the gates as soldiers debated the option of death with honor but chose instead to live. He looked ahead with steely eyes, the townspeople later whispered. The warmth and kindness they were accustomed to would be no more. Mothers resolved to end the lives of their children should the barbarians come to their villages, their homes. Men who had been too old, too sick, or wholly unsuited for the pains of war began amassing weapons, while the children hiding in shadows watched the newcomers with sharp eyes and eager countenances. The enemy had found a haven, but the Hayarans had lost their own. Tucking the embers of hope deep into their hearts, most resolved to stay loyal to the Hayara they knew, the gods they loved.

As Kimbaru entered the great chamber, with the lapis-laden walls, the gold-designed flooring, and the obsidian glinting with an ominous light all around him, it was the throne that appeared before him which caught his attention. There, Kaydeh awaited his master's return. Kimbaru took in the boy's scrapes and hid a scowl. The moment would not be ruined with questions, but he would certainly discover the story behind those wounds.

"Welcome home, Your Majesty," the boy bowed.

Smiling wholeheartedly at this greeting, knowing he could finally breathe with ease, Kimbaru stepped toward the obsidian chair he had coveted. It was immaculately polished, the gold masterfully molded and hand-carved to perfection; a combination of clear, black and brown set in the metal frame so beautiful, he

stared in wonder for a few moments. The splendor of the room, the symbolic nature of that throne; none of it was lost on those who followed in behind him. Never had his people seen such grandeur, such dazzling brilliance. He would have the queen's version removed, of course. He had no intention of having a woman rule by his side, he decided. Ramona might protest, but he doubted the duplicitous woman honestly expected queendom. No other woman deserved it.

"What happened to our king and queen?" Someone demanded, screaming from behind the crowd of onlookers. The people grabbed and pushed him forward to face Kimbaru on his own. Angry grumbles could be heard, but the commander had no intention of killing anyone outright, not just yet. The rage would die down, he knew; nobles would defect, and the people would come around to accept him.

Hard eyes fell upon the wretch pulling himself to his feet with fire in his gaze. Yes, a true Hayaran, Kimbaru mused as he took in the robust features of the fool before him. These are men of considerable pride, worthy of his respect if he deemed to offer it. Of course, that only made breaking them all the more delectable.

"Your royals are dead, long gone and never to return to the world of the living." Kimbaru's voice boomed against the walls, the echo only adding to the power to each syllable uttered. Gasps resounded, cries were stifled, and prayers were said in earnest. The language was a foreign one, but he had been picking up enough for a coherent conversation. His days of study had certainly paid off. Parts of the Hayaran language were spoken in the south as well, where Kimbaru had first been exposed to the lyrical lexicon. Closing his eyes for a moment, he let the information sink in before beginning the most critical speech he knew he would make in all the summers he planned to rule from this throne.

"Dearest Hayarans who now stand before me alongside my people, my army, my children, my women, and my commanders. From this day on, I am your king. I took this land as my own, but I have no wish to harm the people that reside here..."

"Liar!" someone called out, pushing himself forward. He was cut down by one of Kimbaru's warriors the moment the obsidian knife was spotted in his hand. The man fell with a thud as the local populace screamed in terror, a few trying to escape.

Raising a hand, Kimbaru was able to silence them all with a single word. "Enough!"

"My own have embedded themselves in the crowd; I suggest no more such... interruptions." The smile which spread across Kimbaru's lips was one none would forget. It was horribly beautiful, as if the man relished the blood spilled on sacred ground. Much became clear. Should the people give sufficient reason for this man's anger, the carnage that would ensue would spare none. Furthermore, it was almost painfully clear it would be a pleasure for the self-proclaimed king to administer the punishment himself. Men pulled their wives and children closer, hoping to shield them from whatever designs this usurper may have. Most had left the more vulnerable members of their family at home, but curiosity had gotten the better of many. Men pushed their families into safer crevices, while some stealthily stole the youngest out of the castle. There was no telling when violence would erupt, and none desired to have young ones underfoot.

Motioning for Kaydeh to step forward, Kimbaru spoke with a sickeningly sweet voice, causing shudders to travel among the crowd. "Loyalty should never go unnoticed. Here, loyalty and love intertwine. This is the man I name my successor. From this day forward, he shall be known as my son. I present, Prince Kaydeh."

Wide eyes rounded impossibly as this information was absorbed. Kimbaru felt pride swell for the young man who had expected to be named adviser, a right-hand companion to the king. Kaydeh was thoroughly unprepared for this turn of events, however, and that delighted the new king to no end.

"Your Majesty!"

The moment was worth everything. He would have massacred the whole of Hayara if need be to see such extreme joy shining

through beautiful eyes. Feeling a strange sensation in the pit of his stomach, even the prickle of tears against his eyelids, newly declared father and son embraced to cheers. Of course, some responded with grim frowns and glacial glares, but that did not affect the duo in the least.

With Prince Kaydeh by his side, puffed up with an incredibly satisfied smile, Kimbaru continued with his earlier speech. He had not planned on naming Kaydeh his son yet but felt a show of kind gratitude for those most loyal to him would help deter the Hayaran bystanders from any more attacks.

"My people, for today you are all my people. I stand before you not as a conqueror, but as your king. I will protect you, ensure your comforts, and allow this land to prosper. I will merge your traditions with my own, your culture with the myriad that have contributed to ours. I will show you love and kindness, but I will rule with iron force. No criminal activity will go unpunished so long as I sit on this throne. You will want for nothing; your families will never see a day of starvation if I can prevent it in any manner. I expect your devotion, your loyalty, and your goodwill. In return, you will find I am a fair leader with good intentions. We will all live in harmony. This is my will and my decree."

The speech was met with hoots and joyful cries, to Kimbaru's amusement. The Hayarans watched with trepidation as the new king so seamlessly ensured his power, wary of the commander's intentions. Many of their own seemed satisfied with what felt like a ruse. The excitement was undoubtedly contagious, the crowd's cheers and grinning faces drowning the more negative thoughts and emotions. Condescending whispers died out. Nobles confused about their status showed signs of hope. And as a pair of eyes watched from the shadows, the gold reduced to mere specks, one by one those once loyal to the Golden Couple stepped forward and dropped to their knees in a pledge that would save them from the brutality of the summers to come. Turning away from the troubling ascension of an uncouth rebel to king of one of the wealthiest nations in the known world, the man melted into the background and decided he would rule the peaks whence no man dared pass.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Crossroads



"You come seeking answers."

Arme watched with interest as Hayisi raised herself from a prostrate position, covered in nothing but those impressively long and otherworldly tresses. Her braids were undone and cascading in gentle waves around her body, as lovely as beckoning moonbeams. It felt as if he had walked in on a divine ritual, a beastly trespasser on Haya's domain.

Spindly arms and legs peeked through the silver waterfall as she stood, pushing palms together in prayer. He watched the scene, mesmerized, with the gaze of a man transfixed. It was Haya he saw and Haya he worshiped in that moment with her. She did not appear ashamed of his gaze. He found himself in awe, but strangely without lust when tracing her body with his eyes. It was rare a man was allowed to see a priestess in the nude, considered a high honor that spoke of unequivocal trust. He watched as he had on the day he met her, wondering once again if she was at all mortal or a divine creature herself.

"Yes."

Arme felt something was off, not quite right. He was having

trouble pinpointing it, however.

Shifting slightly, she approached him. He did not understand her unnatural movements. She knew he was there, but where once his voice would have been enough for her to pinpoint his location and glide over with ease, she seemed almost uncoordinated; confused even. It was clear she was trying her best to hide something. A growl formed low in his throat as he took in certain details he hoped were untrue.

"Will you ask the questions on your mind?" Her words brought him out of his reverie.

"You know what I wish to know, Priestess."

Her brows had knit, and for once he wondered if she might cry.

"Do you not hear me?" He growled, hands on her shoulders, ready to shake her in his irritation.

"Your touch was enough to allow me to understand you, it appears," she stated, bringing her hands to his reverently, as if she had discovered something miraculous.

Lost, he began pulling back, but her fingers remained entwined with his. For all her divine abilities, she seemed almost fragile. She was so thin; he was sure the wind would push her off the cliff should she take a careless step. Something was certainly not right.

"Why do you say that?"

"Each time I invoke the power of the goddess, I lose something quite important," she replied, refusing to pull her hand away despite Arme's obvious discomfort.

Eyes widening, the truth of the situation sank in. "Can you hear me?"

"In a sense," she smiled, the rumbling vibrations of his voice and the clarity of his thoughts mixing for a rather entertaining manner of conversation. "I can see what you speak in my mind so long as there is a connection created through touch. What the Mother takes away, she replaces with an equally appreciated gift."

"You have lost your hearing."

"Yes."

"You can read my mind?"

"What you allow me to see by speaking it out loud."

Laughing at the absurdity of it all, Arme disentangled himself and walked away. Sightless eyes watched him, and he wondered if she imagined him standing there, seething.

"I can feel the waves of your fire warming me," she stated suddenly.

He turned to her but remained quiet, considering her words.

"You are wondering if he is dead or alive."

"You can read my mind!"

She did not answer, and he realized she did not know what he had said. Approaching the strangely poised woman before him, he put a hand on her shoulder. He watched her eyes widen in alarm, her lips open in a silent "O" as her body shivered under his touch.

"What is it?"

"Your hands are large, the palms callused," she murmured.

"These were not the hands of a prince."

"You speak in riddles again."

He was glad for the sudden change in her gaze as she stared into the distance to give him some semblance of privacy and personal space between them. The close proximity to the nude woman old enough to be his family matriarch was discomfiting. Taking a deep breath and trying to think of anything but the fact that his fingers clutched naked skin, he was doubly glad when she spoke once more. "I believe he is somewhere in the mountains, hidden with the power of a priestess long fallen from Haya's grace. However, he might as well be dead. Should he be removed from his chains, he will die. Unfortunately, it was the will of the gods. They refuse to see him die."

"Is the king truly alive, then? I know you had a hand in this."

"Why would you think I had anything to do with it?"

"Kimbaru is a tyrannical maniac. He would have preferred a public execution to spread fear among the people and quell any possible rebellion. When hope is dead, none will dare speak against his rule."

"You underestimate his intelligence."

"Do I?"

"Yes, my dear, you do. But I admit I stopped the commander's hand."

"How?"

"I will simply state that I have more power over the self-proclaimed king than even he realizes."

Confused, Arme nearly broke contact with the woman before him. Catching himself in time, he squeezed her shoulder instead.

"What did you give up to ensure this power?"

"Why do you believe I required a sacrifice?"

"All power requires sacrifice. It was you who taught me this."

Sighing, she conceded. "So, it was."

"You lost your hearing in place of this power, did you not?"

Cocking her head to the side and trying to gauge his emotions, Hayisi nodded. "Yes."

Pushing her away, he tried to rein in explosive emotions. "You have lost your mind!"

"Your emotions are powerful. I do not need a connection to know you think I have gone completely mad," Hayisi smiled. She had expected this. The man before her was a noble creature, loyal to his family and his people. She was proud to be considered so important as to incite such emotions and felt touched by his earnestness. It should have been inconceivable that he could feel so

strongly. Once again, she wondered if something had gone wrong during the process of his change. While unsure, Haya's appearance in the cave as the *dakhanavar* had tried to take flight had confirmed the goddess's approval.

She had read about these creatures long ago. As a child, her curiosity was insatiable. She was obsessed with learning every rule, every spell, and every prayer. Her desperation in drinking in her education had been both a source of great pride and great worry for her mother. As she had obtained power, however, she had matured in a manner none expected. Her abilities surpassed those of all she had known. The most powerful priestesses could not compete with her as she was now. However, she had not expected the loss of her senses. Sometimes, she wondered if she had grown too bold too quickly, despite being entirely thankful for the magic that flowed through her. Because of her sacrifices, the kingdom the gods had bequeathed them had flourished.

Arme watched the resolve on the woman's face, wondering at her thoughts. It mattered not. For him, such sacrifice was inconceivable.

"You forget your own sacrifice, *Dakhanavar*," she reminded him, frightfully accurate in her assessment of his thinking processes. He did not know how to respond.

For a short time, they stood in agitated silence, each wondering how to broach the one subject they considered taboo.

"What if we fail in the end?"

Hayisi looked to her companion and sighed. "Then we can only say we served Haya to the best of our abilities. We could do nothing more."

Nodding, Arme watched the stars twinkle overhead. The day had passed, and he needed to get back to the queen as soon as possible. He looked around him and wondered why he had not simply brought her here. The only answer he could produce was that it was too well known, despite never having visitors. Kimbaru could come here himself, and that simply would not do. The moon

was so bright already that he had no trouble discerning the features of the priestess before him. "Yes, we did. At least I hope I did. I will try to remember that. I pray we never face such an end."

"It is up to you."

"Yes, and how I raise the child."

"You have sacrificed much, my son, and have so much to do yet."

Laughing, Arme entwined his fingers in hers. "You have given up more than I can imagine, yourself. I have merely traded mortality for power. I think I got the better end of the deal."

"I am glad you think so," she smiled.

They stood quietly, both lost in thought.

"Tell her he is gone. It is best for everyone that way."

"What a terrible thing to say."

"Yes, it is. It is the worst."

"Yet, you say it in such a calm manner..."

Laughing mirthlessly, Hayisi turned to face him. He looked into the blurry blue of her unseeing eyes; noticed the deepened wrinkles surrounding them. He followed the deep hollows of her cheeks, took in the strange pallor of her skin. She had become nearly impossible to recognize. Shivering at the thought of what caused these changes, Arme felt a peculiar desire to protect her from the world. His passion seemed to translate into her mind as she smiled and lightly leaned against his arm.

"Thank you for taking things in stride, *Dakhanavar*."

"I do not exactly have a choice." Her sudden gratitude confused him.

"No, I suppose you do not. I am sure you would like to know where your son is as well."

"You have Arahur?" Astonished, Arme's eyes widened, and his heart began to beat at an alarming rate.

Feeling the heartbeat, Hayisi nearly jumped out of her skin. "You... it's beating!"

"Yes... Hayadusta had that effect, strangely. So did Hayli. And now you. Against all your predictions, I have generally had a beating heart. I find the sudden lack of it from time to time extremely frightening."

She knit her brows. "You fed on her?"

"The queen? Never!"

"And Hayli?"

"Yes. But my heart beat from the moment I arrived home."

"How strange..."

"Yes, extremely. At least according to your words. If I were dead, I should not be able to think and feel and house a beating heart. That is secondary right now, however. Where is my son?"

"He is safe, *Dakhanavar*. He is with a priestess I trust completely. The boy will have the best of care." Hayisi appeared distracted, and he wished he were privy to the thoughts plaguing her.

Hayisi was not expecting this at all. It occurred to her—quite correctly—that Arme had retained his humanity enough to sire a child, enough to keep the blood pumping through him as it would in a living mortal. She wondered if he had completed the cycle of death and rebirth correctly. If he had, he was about as alive as she. It must have also been why he had not been overcome by bloodlust during the battle, she realized with a start.

Arme had long stopped thinking about his heart, his ability to have children, his lack of thirst, or even the creature he had become. In the here and now, he simply needed to know more about his son.

"Tell me, Priestess. Where is he?"

"I cannot reveal his whereabouts tonight. He must spend his early summers with the family that took him in. They will foster him until you are able to care for him yourself."

Trying to mask his anguish, Arme nodded. "And Hayli?"

"She is well enough, but I fear her mental state is not quite right. I do not know how long she will survive. My granddaughter has been visiting her often. She is not alone, and neither is Aran."

"You protect them?"

"You sound incredulous."

"I am merely a pawn in the games the gods play."

With a hint of sadness in her features, the priestess took the hand of the creature she had created. His emotions were raw and simple. "Yes," she murmured, "but you are as human as can be, given the circumstances."

He did not hear her well.

"We are all pawns in the games of the gods," she spoke loudly now and with ease, as if the concept were not at all foreign.

"You accept that?"

"Not in so many words, no. I understand there are things which must occur to set off another chain of events. One must stand to learn how to walk. One must fall to learn how to rise. One must lose a battle to win a war. Such is life."

Sighing, Arme chose to close his eyes and take it all in. "One must experience sorrow to understand joy, feel the rain to see a rainbow."

"Exactly. Life is full of dualities. Opposing dualities."

"I agree. And so, we must endure the pain, the terror, the utter degradation of self, in order to rise above it and take back our throne."

He was surprised by the genuine laugh, not knowing she was glad she had been privy to the passion with which those words appeared to her. "Yes, my darling prince. We will certainly rise above it all."

"And the throne?"

"That is up to you."

"Me?"

"The queen will have a child, as you know. The child is destined to bring back our peace. You must guide her on that path. You will live for nothing else until she is ready to rise, as you so eloquently stated."

"This was my purpose all along?"

Smiling, Hayisi placed her hand over his.

"I feel a special kinship with you," he spoke softly.

"Yes, and I with you. You were the babe I loved enough to sacrifice myself for. You are the man I have made many more sacrifices to protect. I love the person you have become as a mother loves her child. Such a fascinating creation, and such a kind one at that. I was born to protect you, just as you were born to protect the child. Haya certainly works in mysterious ways."

They remained quiet for a few moments, allowing her words to sink in. Arme knew she was right. The pang of guilt he felt for all she had given up threatened to consume him, but he knew he would be making similar sacrifices for the little girl his queen would birth. He had already given up much. There would be more to come.

"Priestess, will I see my family again?"

"Perhaps, if you so wish, over the coming summers."

"And if I do not?"

"Then they will believe you dead until the day you rise again," she smiled as she used his words against him.

Her thoughts were kind, and he could almost see them in his mind's eye himself. Almost.

She was content now. There was something so innocent about this powerful being. The man had spirit and a rather enchanting personality. She could see why Hayli had fallen into madness upon

witnessing his change. The woman had never forgiven the priestess, and it was a wonder she allowed Hayimi her regular visits with the family. Perhaps there would be a way to bring the broken soul around?

Upon feeling Arme's indecision, she cupped his cheek and, pulling him downward, placed a kiss on his forehead. "You have ample time to make that decision, my son. For now, care for the queen, bring her comfort in the days to come. Her pain will be deep. Do not allow her to live with false hope for too long."

"It could kill her..."

"Yet, it will not. Not so long as Hayadusta has you to lean on in the darkest moments, to soothe her."

"Yes," he responded, looking away. Hayisi could see his longing to take the queen into his arms and soothe her worries, just as the priestess had done for him. She could see the emotion he held for her.

"Suddenly, it is as if I stand with an adoptive mother."

"Perhaps you do," she smiled indulgently. She had been willing to die to ensure Arme's rebirth as the true Dark Prince. She had lost her sight protecting him as a babe, a part of her soul creating him, and now she had lost her hearing in safeguarding his family.

"It is interesting, Priestess."

"What is?"

"In the end, it is the human connection that allows us to communicate. It is a human connection that keeps me sane. The human connection that protects and gentles the queen's pain. We are nothing alone. We are so strong when together." Disentangling and raising a hand, he watched his fingers before bending them into a fist. "A finger alone is powerless. However, together, the five fingers are a formidable thing. A fist can kill when one hits in the right place or enough times. A finger can barely cause a prick of pain. Even to pinch, you need two."

"Yes. Alone, I would not be able to function in this state. However, I have my Hayimi with me. I have the goddess communicating with me through visions and premonitions, however unsettling they may be. I also have my trust in your power and your resolve to do what is right. As you can see, I am not alone."

"Arameni was stronger with Hayadusta by his side. I was strong with Hayli and Aran. Perhaps I am still strong because of them. We all need someone to lean on."

"You are rather philosophical, Arme."

Laughing, "Yes, I suppose I am. Forgive me."

"No need. Return to the queen. She should wake soon."

"You can feel her?"

"Surprisingly, yes. It might have to do with the child within her. I have a connection with that little one."

Sobering, Arme leaned in to hug the older priestess. Surprised, her arms lay limp by her side as she accepted the small show of affection with maternal love. Her old friend would have been proud of the man her son had become. She just wished the late royals could have known what the Dark Prince would achieve in his lifetime.

Released from the embrace, Arme stood and lightly kissed Hayisi's weathered cheek. He felt like home to her.

"Before you go..."

"Yes?"

"There is a vial you should take with you. However, I will need you to help me find it."

"Of course. Will you come with me for the birth?"

"Come for me when her water breaks, Arme. Hayimi has not returned, and I am afraid I would not be much help without the poultices. Should she feel pain, you may give her this tonic." She led him into the temple as he marveled at her lithe grace as well as the

carved white stone. She knew the intricate carvings would fascinate him as the priestess brought him to a closed room. Here, clay vials of different concoctions lined the walls. She could imagine him standing mouth agape as he peered at painted pottery, before stopping before a tinted glass collection.

"Where are these from? Xin merchants?"

He touched her before repeating the question.

"Yes, they are simply stunning. Hayimi enjoys watching the light reflect through them. They are a marvel to behold, she says." Smiling wistfully, the High Priestess traced the designs on the stone beneath her fingers, two triple angles wrapped together as one to create a star of sorts. The symbol of Ar, a wheel of eternity with eight curved lines coming together in an image similar to the mark on the prince's arm, was carved within the six-pointed star.

"Yes, they truly are magnificent," he muttered, unsure which was more beautiful to behold.

"Arme, find the clay pot with the bull's head painted in Vortan garmir. That should be the best option for her pains."

"It will calm Hayadusta?"

"Yes. It will calm her enough to get through each contraction."

"Thank you, Priestess."

A humor-filled glint in those eyes marked by the crinkling around them, Hayisi grinned. "My sweet boy, this will be the second childbirth within two moon spans you experience. Few men are given such a blessing."

Groaning at her mirth, he smiled back. She knew he was not looking forward to going through that process again. Hayli had not been easy on him, and the aftermath of the birth had certainly scarred his soul in a manner few men would ever experience.

"I hope this one will not despise me once the babe arrives," he forced a laugh, dispelling the gloominess of her thoughts.

"You are a good man, Arme. Never forget that. You deserve any

and all happiness you are able to pluck from each situation."

"Thank you, Priestess," he said, squeezing her shoulder.

Hayisi's eyes prickled as she felt him leave her side, leaping with great strides as he hurried back to the mountainous sanctuary where his queen slept. As he vanished from her view, she prayed.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Rise of the Phoenix



The contractions had begun.

Looking back, Arme should have known that nothing came without a price. At times, he wondered where his ability to make simple deductions had disappeared. He arrived as the night wore on to discover Hayadusta panting and in pain. With the darkness slipping away and the gentle dew of dawn now covering the earth, came a decided increase in her suffering. Adding droplets of the tincture he had brought with him to her water pouch, Arme hoped she would settle down a little, at least. He could barely coach her through a few breaths before it became abundantly clear the child was coming.

Cursing his fate, he wondered once again why he had not forced Hayisi to come with him. He could not leave the laboring queen now that she was in this state, which meant he was on his own. He had no medical training. Head spinning with the responsibility placed on his shoulders, Arme tried to recall the process of his wife's two births. He could get through this, he ground out to himself. What was one more on a list of babes he saw into this world? Of course, there was no midwife this time around. No villager to shoo him off, no healer to cut the cord, no priestess to

show him what to do. He would have to figure it out himself. First, he had to get her through the suffering.

"Help me, Arme!"

"Of course, my queen. Hush now, you will be all right. Breathe in, now breathe out."

With the end of the contraction came a moment of awkwardness.

"Arme, right now, do not think of me as a queen, but as your sister-in-law. I should not have shown such weakness to a man."

"My queen, please do not shy away. I, too, am not exactly comfortable with this situation, but please bear with me. Try to think of me as you would Arameni, as a man you love deeply and are not ashamed of showing every facet of yourself to. You can cry, you can scream. You may even hit me should that help you vent your emotions. For whatever would ease your pain, I am at your command." Bowing his head as he uttered the last few words, he noticed her clenched fists. He knew she was trying to restrain herself and was relieved when she seemed to take him up on his offer.

"Would you please light some candles, Arme?"

"Of course!" With a whoosh, he was gone, leaving her to rest her frayed nerves for a few moments.

Hayadusta might have loved her brother-in-law, but she was not comfortable at all with the idea of him seeing her in the throes of pain, pushing out a child. She had heard of what comes with it. The fluids, the blood, the horror and beauty of the moment when the baby's head would slide out. She was definitely uncomfortable with this idea. Arameni should have been the one at her side; the priestesses should have been the ones coaching her through this, but fate enjoyed being cruel, it seemed. It was enough to drive her to curse the gods for their lack of compassion, but she knew deep down things could have been worse, much worse. She knew she could not have this baby alone. She had never gone through this process before, did not know what to expect. The ladies at court had

not given her much insight either, other than warning her about the pain and the long hours awaiting the child's passage into the light. No, she could not do this alone. She would have to trust in her husband's brother to see her through the process. He had helped his wife through two births already. At least he had some experience on which she could rely.

His words had unsettled her. Think of him as her husband? Impossible. He was too different, too unnerving in personality. Her husband was like the sun, bright and warm. Instead, Arme was like the earth. Grounded, scorching, musky in scent and built like the ancient tree of life. For that was what she saw when she looked at him: Life.

Raising her eyes to the ceiling of their cave, where the furs warmed the cold stone together with the fire that burned before her in its enclave, she inhaled the fresh and somewhat musty scent which comes from having water trickling through any cracks it could find. As the soft deer hide beneath her tickled her senses and she ran a hand over the wooden frame he had so painstakingly set up upon arrival, she wondered at the man hunting for candles outside. There must be a village nearby. She was sure he had understood her need for scent and the sensations of touch as well, for he had ensured these distractions from the contractions were constantly available to her. Though she did not want to remove her clothing, it was only prudent at this stage.

The clenching of her abdomen was impossible to get through without screaming now. Counting her breaths, she tried not to cry as she removed all shreds of modesty from her body. Unsure how long he had been gone, she waddled over to the opening of their cave, waiting for her Dark Prince while warming her body with the bright rays of the sun in the sky. It was exceptionally warm today, and the beads of sweat raced down her body both from her exertions and the bright orb overhead. It was a peaceful landscape, and they were nestled amidst a chain of mountains, impossible for one to find if he did not know distinctly where to look.

"My queen, you will catch a cold thus!" Hurrying back to her

side was a shocked Arme, with an arm full of candles. Large and small, scented with wild thyme and lavender, the candles would have fallen should she not have lunged to help catch them. Smiling nervously, the queen moved her arms around her body as she tried to hide the fact that she had finally shed her royal garb, instead opting for her simple shift tied into place with braided hemp. The hem fell just above her knees, and the cut allowed her to move freely.

"No, I think the day is quite warm."

Cocking his head to the side, Arme seemed unsure how to respond. Instead, he began fussing around before appearing beside her as she was racked with another spasm. Massaging the small of her back, he led her to the comforts of her makeshift bed.

"I wonder..." she breathed. "Do I bring into this world a prince or a princess?"

"As the gods will, my queen," he responded gently. Trifling with destiny could not have positive results. It was better to keep the child's identity a secret for now. She would know the truth of it soon enough. Fibbing was not Arme's strongest suit, but he did not wish to negatively affect the queen's mindset.

"Yes, as the gods will it."

Smiling, he turned to tend to her needs.

"I hope for a boy."

"Why not a girl?"

"Women have no place in this world where men rule and men fight. Women are stifled, used, and cast aside. They do not get to die a warrior's death. They are raped and tortured, their babes torn from their breasts. A man's might often overrules a woman's. Yes, we can rule, but not without a husband. The matriarchal system has been dying a brutal death as new ideas are brought from the south, especially. The Mother Goddess will one day be forgotten, but none will forget Ar. I want my son to take back his birthright. To rule strong and true. A daughter could never do that," she whispered

the last as a tear rolled down her passion-reddened cheeks.

Her confession was met with silence.

"I loved my husband, Arme. I loved him with every part of myself. There was nothing he would do that I would not tolerate, that I would not encourage. He was my sun, as I was his moon. He was my Ar, and I, his Haya. Oh, Arme, I love him still! Tell me he lives!"

Immediately by her side, he took the sobbing woman into his arms and just held her. There wasn't anything he could say. The gods were cruel to have separated such a devoted and passionate couple. His brother's prison was unknown. He would try to locate it, but Hayisi's words rang true. They would not see the king again. It was best the queen believe him dead. Poking around and asking questions would only alert the enemy to their sanctuary, as it was.

"I need him, Arme. I cannot do this on my own."

"You are not alone, my queen. I promise, just as the sun will rise each day, whether the sky is cloudy or clear, I will be by your side. I shall not leave you. Never! I will raise your child as I would my own. Perhaps I will bring my own here, as well. I will care for all of you. You will want for nothing. So, when the day comes, I will fight at the head of your army as you take back your lands and once again sit on the obsidian throne."

"Thank you, sweet creature. I have never known the type of kindness you seem to exude so confidently. It is both refreshing and unnerving."

Smiling at her words, he merely bowed his head.

"Arameni would have been proud of how you handled everything. You did not betray us. You protected me. For that, I owe you my life and that of my unborn child."

As she uttered those words of gratitude, she doubled over in pain, the contractions stronger now.

"Stay with me," she ground out as she squeezed his hand tightly,

both of them on their knees now as she tried to steady herself.

Heart pounding and palms sweaty, he understood her. He would not leave her. Not now, not ever. It was hard enough for her to thank him. He would make sure she knew he understood her feelings. Nothing was more important than the queen and this child.

"Always," he uttered quietly. No other words were necessary.

"You are human, no matter what magic is at work here," she said, looking into his eyes. Sweat dripped from her brows, fingers dug into the soft fur underneath her as she panted.

"No, but thank you for thinking so." Cupping her face, he kissed her forehead. He was glad she did not resist his touch.

"You are," she stated adamantly. "I hope you know how much you mean to me."

"You are kind, my queen, but one cannot love a monster," he smiled bitterly, biting back harsher words.

"Your wife must love you."

"Once, yes. These past seasons have been a trial. I fear I no longer recognize the emotions in Hayli's eyes. For her, I am a monster."

Shaking her head, Hayadusta tried again.

"A monster would not protect a human."

"This monster protects his queen."

"Why?" Her frustration grew with each word, her body rocking under the pressure she felt against her nether regions.

"The gods have willed it so."

"Why?"

"The child!" He ground out. "I protect the child!"

"Why?" This time she screamed, both at the absurdity of his words and as another contraction nearly ripped her apart.

"Your daughter is all that is left to save our world," he threw back at her, desperately trying to gentle the pain through expert fingers on her lower back.

He barely registered her still body before her gasp. "A... daughter?"

He paused.

"It is a girl? You are telling me you knew I would be birthing a girl?"

Pulling back, he cursed himself.

"Yes."

"You knew, all this time, and said nothing?"

"Yes."

"She is the one you protect, the only reason you are here? The only reason you came back?"

Seeing her breathing had become shallow, he tried to calm her down. He truly hated keeping secrets. He could never abide by lies.

"No."

"Tell me, my dear Dark Prince, who is it you protect?"

Kneeling before her, he bowed his head, the *dakhanavar* before his queen. He loved her, he realized. By the gods, he loved her with everything he had. He was a glutton for misery, it appeared, for he still loved his wife just as dearly as well. Wondering if this was a cursed result of his change, he understood in that moment how he belonged to both mother and child. Right now, standing before him with only a shift covering her painfully swollen body, he found himself drawn to her in a way even his wife could not compare with. He was a moth to a flame, her anger only deepening the passion in his heart. He was despicable, and he knew it. It was a wonder anyone could love him. Even the brother who had shown him such affections, despite all else, had fallen. He had failed to protect Arameni, but he would not abandon his brother's wife. He would not leave his queen, no matter what he had to face to keep

her safe.

Hayadusta watched him angrily, and even when her next contraction brought her back to her knees, she refused to give in to either her pain or her pity. He could see it in her eyes, the scorn for his lies, for facing her and uttering falsehoods or simply not uttering the truth at all. He could blame it on the tumult within her body right now, on the imbalance to her emotions caused by pregnancy, but he knew he deserved the withering look she regarded him with. No matter which angle he took, He had not been honest. And so, he remained there on his knees, eyes lowered to where her shift was being pulled under her knees. He did not know what she saw, but he hoped against hope that it was still the man she claimed he was, flesh and blood worthy of her respect. He did not want to be a monster in her eyes, even if he felt that was all he could be in his own.

"Why?"

"Please rest, my queen, and I will tell you how my current form came to be," he implored of her without raising his gaze.

Nodding at his show of devotion, she sat cross-legged and began massaging her belly with light caresses. The baby had gotten too big to kick much now, but she still felt it. Her. The queen felt her daughter's very essence as she sat there listening to the *dakhanavar's* story.

"Life had always been one obstacle after another, but I was happy enough with a loving wife and sweet-natured son. I enjoyed my days as a farmer in the fields. The sun, the streams, the waterfalls, the grass, and flowers; they all brought me peace. Climbing the mountains was a joy. Tilling the land day in and day out, tending to our animals, it was an everyday routine that satisfied me. Then she came. A messenger from Haya, she spoke of destiny, of war and fiery days. She told me what was to come, but I did not know what to make of it. How could I have said anything to anyone? Who would have believed me? I told Arameni to strengthen the borders. He was already working on that. I informed him about traitors among our ranks, of the Fonecian we had found."

She frowned, but remained silent.

"Arameni shook his head at that point, but I know it had him checking every newcomer from then on. I mentioned increasing the training of our soldiers time and again to both him and his advisers, and though it appeared he did bring it up a notch, I feel as if my words fell on deaf ears. So, I remained quiet, and I remained vigilant. Before the attacks began, I ensured we would have a safe place to hide you, should it have come to that. And it did. My lady, your life is most important to me, with or without the baby. She is, however, a part of the prophecy which has shaped my destiny. I became what I am now to serve her when the time came; of course, after ensuring her safe delivery into this world. That automatically places me as your protector, as well. However, I do not serve you because you carry the daughter of Haya. I serve you because I love you with a passion Ar would surely understand."

"You love me?" She managed to grind out, gritting her teeth against the pain as she held onto the wooden frame, rocking back and forth. From the intensity of each contraction, she was sure the baby would be here soon. The noontide sun was high at this point, and she hoped they were far enough away from humanity to prevent them from discovery should her screams be heard echoing through the mountains. Refusing to take this risk, she nodded when Arme offered her thick leather to bite down on.

"Most fervently," he stated, raising his eyes to hers. "But not the type of love found with newlyweds. Not the love for sister, nor the love for queen. It is a love that bids self-sacrifice, one that is incomparable with any I have known to date."

"I believe you," she conceded, removing the strap for a moment. "You are noble in spirit, loyal in heart. You know I cannot love you, however—at least not in the manner you speak of?"

"I know," he smiled.

"I doubt that is something a man would normally smile about," she tried to return the sentiment, but it came out more like a grimace.

"No, but you needing me is enough. I have been loved before and understand how fickle an emotion it could be. There is a thin line between love and hatred. I realized that when I became this... a beast."

"You became nothing. You are Ar's favored son, with abilities and needs beyond human understanding. I trust you to care for us, both of us, my friend."

With a watery gaze, he held her hand. "Thank you."

Closing her eyes, she allowed their conversation to distract her while she practiced her breathing. "Where is Hayli?"

"Our second son broke her. He is red of hair, fair of skin, dark of eyes. Resembles me, but somehow, I see an inferno when I look at him. He was not supposed to happen. The priestesses assured me of this. I do not know what to think."

"He is like you, then. A *dakhanavar*. Am I correct?"

"Perhaps. I cannot comprehend how. The priestesses were as baffled as I was; but the little one, Hayimi, blessed him. Hayisi, the High Priestess, saw to Arahur's birth and has assured me of the boy's safety. I thought my transformation had killed her, but she came back stronger than ever, despite her alarming aging. Sometimes..."

When he trailed off, looking into the distance, she lightly touched his arm. "Yes?"

"Sometimes I wonder if Haya did not send her to me so that I could know a mother's love of sorts."

She smiled, caressing his callused fingers with her own.

"If the priestesses blessed him, that means he is to be loved as well."

"She said the gods are happy with the outcome and that he is quite special. There were some disturbing words she uttered earlier, but I feel I do not have to worry much. I have not seen either of my sons since the start of the war, but I know they are safe. I have a

bond with each of them now, in this state, a connection I never had as a human. It is one of the more positive factors in all of this. That, and the fact that I can summon fire and defeat most any foe single-handedly," he grinned at the last, lightening the mood considerably.

Nodding, she nuzzled against him as he moved to rub her back.

"Time will tell what all of this means. From what Hayisi mentioned, few *dakhanavars* have been made, and none have ever been born. We are a rare species." He laughed at that and looked at his queen. "I do not frighten you?"

"Not in the least," she confided, warmth lacing her words.

She screamed out suddenly before remembering to bite on the leather strap. As the fluids spilled out of her, Arme helped Hayadusta lower herself into a squatting position, holding onto the frame. She shook her head frantically, begging for water as she began to push, each tensing of her body bringing a little more of the child out into the world. The pain was excruciating. She was not sure if she was losing consciousness or when her strength waned. It appeared as if she kept finding herself in a black void, the water he offered her, her only reprise. As he gently maneuvered the child the way he had watched Hayisi coax Arahur out of Hayli, Arme prayed he would not cause the babe harm with his ministrations. Her body was doing the job for him, though, as he ensured the cord stayed clear of the little one's neck.

Quick to catch the babe before cradling an exhausted Hayadusta with the newborn at her chest, Arme sighed in relief as he realized the trembling he noticed came from his own body. Thanking Haya repeatedly, he closed his eyes and only opened them when the queen stiffened in his arms. It was then that they saw the sky had darkened, though it was only midday, and thunder rang out. Two birds suddenly appeared: fiery creatures of legends long forgotten. They rose to the heavens as queen and prince watched, mesmerized, in what seemed to be an intricate dance of ancient times. They were flaming beasts brightening the atmosphere, their shapes nearly indiscernible as great wings brought them higher still. In the skies beyond this incredible scene, the clouds took on

the shape of the wheel of eternity, the same sacred symbol which had appeared once before on the battlefield, the same as the mark on his arm. From far away, the jarring sounds of swords still clashing as rebels fought against Kimbaru's men were reduced to an almost pleasant tinkling of metal bells. In contrast, each strike of lightning made the ground shake. They were safe in their cave, but their people were not. As the gods continued to batter the earth, a loud explosion was heard far off in the distance, and suddenly, in the least inhabited regions, a mountain seemed to explode, fire rained from the sky and lava scorched the lands in a shower humanity only sees once every thousand years.

As the world around them faced despair and destruction, queen and prince smiled upon hearing the babe's first wail.



Thank you for joining Arme, Arameni, Hayadusta, Hayisi, and the others on their journey. I hope their story gives you all the feels, and that you look forward to reading more.

Ready to continue the journey? Check out an excerpt from *Child of the Phoenix* in the next few pages!



About the Author

Born and raised in Toronto, Canada, Tamar Isajanyan decided to move to Armenia at the age of twenty-three, following that inner voice she often turns to for advice. Lo-and-behold, the journey brought her into the arms of her husband, a lawyer with a New York Bar and a similar decision to continue his life in Yerevan.

Tamar has a BA in Psychology, a BEd, and an MBA. A bookie from an early age, she finds the ancient world most intriguing. If there are gods and fantastical creatures of lore in a given story, she is hooked.

The author currently lives in Yerevan, Armenia, with her loving husband and beautiful toddler, surrounded by supportive friends and family.

Books in this Series

Prequel – [Blood of the Phoenix](#)

Alternate Prequel – [Mark of the Phoenix](#)

Book 1 – [Rise of the Phoenix](#)

Book 2 – [Child of the Phoenix](#)

Book 3 – [Fall of the Phoenix](#)



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Child of the Phoenix Excerpt

Chapter 1

Childhood



"The mountains will bow to his will..."

A child ran ahead, laughter on her lips.

"... until the day the phoenix will rise..."

A man followed, pretending she was too quick to catch.

"... until the day the gentle stream mixes with the sun, and a flower blooms..."

The wind caressed her long golden-white tresses, the braids come undone in her games.

"... the most beautiful of all."

Words of a prophecy he'd heard some time ago from the lips of a revered priestess repeated through his mind. Words that meant so little and yet so much. The child before him, born the day the phoenix did rise, the day two were seen by man and beast, mating

in the skies as the world around them crumbled to ash. The child he loved more than life itself.

Running through the woods without a care in the world always brought laughter to her lips. Running through the woods with Arme nipping at her heels was ever more amusing for his little Hayame, daughter of the great Queen Hayadusta. He watched her as a stork watches her young. He protected her as an eagle protects hers. A child who enjoyed the stories of her mother's brilliance, of her father's valor. Who knew the legends and recited them day in and day out, ensuring she never forgot who and what she was. Yet, duty put aside, the princess enjoyed nothing more than the wind in her hair as she picked up her skirts and dashed through the fields, climbing up mountains, a smiling *dakhanavar* following just a few paces behind. He loved her, the charming little lady with the flushed cheeks and bright eyes full of tinkling laughter.

"Hayame! Wait for me!"

He pretended to pant as he closed in to scoop up the grinning, mischievous jrahars, little siren of lore. Arme's heart swelled in that moment, holding the daughter he'd been raising as his own alongside a son he'd finally brought home. His brother's daughter. The child he was forever attached to by the will of the gods. His reason for existence. The reason he could love once more.

Joy. He finally felt some joy.

As much as Hayli had been an incredible wife before it all went askew with his acceptance of his destined role, it was Hayadusta who inspired emotions he had long forgotten, filling his soul with an apparent need to protect the now frail queen. Refugees they might be in the mountains of Hayara, his brother lost to the dusts of time, and the enemy ruling the kingdom that should now rightfully be Hayadusta's, but he had one son with him and was certain the other was safe. The babe he had lost much to stand beside was now the queen of his heart. There was little for which he should not be thankful to the gods for, despite the circumstances. While he yearned for the touch of passion on his skin, knowledge that both his queen and his wife were alive and the child of the

union of royals wreaked havoc on his soul lightened the load on his shoulders. Bound to the little princess by duty he might be, but it was a deep affection for her unruly ways, her innate curiosity, and frightfully bright mind that drove him to run after her without a day's reprieve. The exercise did them both good, while her very presence kept his beast at bay.

Innocent laughter pulled at the humanity constantly wrestling to stay in charge. He felt as free as a soaring bird, the wind beneath his wings. For a moment, he imagined himself flying through the skies before the pull of the earth brought him back to the hard ground beneath him.

"Uncle!"

Her hands in the air, a pretty little bracelet glinted in the sun. He'd found it not long after she was born, while scouring the nearby villages for necessities. Hayadusta's eyes shone as she explained how it was often used for teething young. Fascinated, he'd watched the little one start by placing it in her mouth, before she grew enough to allow it to wrap around her wrist, the silver bells chiming with a song of their own. It was his best gift for her, though he often wondered who the original owners may have been. A noble family's treasure, he assumed. He hoped they'd survived the massacres and the raging mountains on the horizon.

"Catch me if you can!"

She giggled as she jumped over one boulder after another, having learned that speed was her best friend and to be of quick foot served her well. At seven summers of age, she was a haverjahars in spirit, at one with the surrounding nature. She was well versed about the dangers, had heard the tales of her father's fate and of the enemies that now ruled from the obsidian throne. And at seven summers, she already yearned to bring peace back to her world, to wipe away the tears from her mother's eyes as they slipped unbidden when the proud queen thought none were around. Arme had seen the determination, heard the whispered oaths. The child was ready to be groomed. He pushed the thought to the back of his mind and concentrated on their game. Time

would tell where they'd end up. Time was still on their side.

"Little cranes can never escape me!" Arme teased with lilting tone, quickening his pace.

She knew he could catch her, but she laughed anyhow.

"Cranes can fly and leave you all alone," she teased back.

"You can fly now, my little haverjahars?"

"Jrahars or haverjahars? You never pick," she grinned, speeding up a little more.

"Depends on whether you're swimming or flying," he jumped in front of her, happiness bubbling within.

Childish whoops followed as Arme swooped his little girl up and kissed her forehead lovingly. Her playful expression squeezed at his heart as he threw her high, tiny arms spreading like wings, and caught her for a dizzying twirl.

"I love you, Uncle Arme," Hayame cuddled into his arms and in that moment, Haya's paradise was all he knew. She valued his attention, and he found her response to his silly antics endearing. Unlike his flesh and blood. It was a rare day where Arahur would play with her, and he found that odd. Two summers had passed and still he was a solemn child who watched more than acted on his desires. The strange creature his wife had begotten, despite his unique charm and gentle words, preferred to watch his kin with fiery eyes, as if an age-old soul resided there. He found it disconcerting and wondered what thoughts passed through the youth's mind. Not to mention the strength the boy displayed time and again, crushing rocks as if they were nothing but clay. That bit reminded him of his own childhood and Arme was glad his son was spared the ridicule and fear that accompanied such unnatural strength. No one would hurt his esteem in lonely mountains.

"And I you, little crane," he smiled, heart lurching as he held her close. "Now, shall we race to see who makes it back quickest?"

With a grin, Hayame jumped out of her uncle's arms and

launched forward. "I want something sweet!"

Throwing his head back in laughter, Arme took a deep breath, grabbed his niece to swing her up, and dashed ahead with such speed that it left her looking drunk with giddiness upon being dumped into her mother's waiting arms. While she'd been expecting a race, she'd received something better. The fun ride on her uncle's shoulders made up for the disappointing lack of competition. And competitive, she was.

"Mayrig!"

"Hayame, what on earth?" She grinned at her daughter. Hayadusta may have been weak since the birth of her child and death of her husband, but Arme knew she drew strength from the moments that were full of simplicity and laughter; moments he felt a pleasurable thrill he'd been able to provide.

"Can I have something sweet? Do we have any sharots?"

Hayame's honeyed voice was enough to make any adult seek to immediately fulfill her wishes. No commands needed. A queen in the making to be revered by all. A little lady spoiled rotten by those who loved her most.

"Silly girl, you need to eat proper food first. And then, yes, you may have as big a piece as you'd like," the queen smiled as she smoothed her daughter's moonlight hair. Arme began mentally counting how many batches were hanging in the room where they kept their food. The grape and walnut delicacy ran out almost as soon as it was prepared between the four of them, especially when Hayame dug in excitedly.

"Yes!" she whooped for joy and jumped out of her mother's lap, stumbling in her haste.

"Be careful, child!"

"Yes, Mayrig! I'm sure Arahur wants some, too."

He felt pride surge at her attempts to include his son, despite Arahur's lack of interest shown.

Arme watched with sudden interest as water droplets seemed to jump and dance in her wake, trailing the little sprite with excitement. Before he could comment, and wondering if he'd imagined it, his questions fell away at the commanding sound of his queen's voice.

Hayadusta turned to him, apparently oblivious to what he'd just seen. "She is growing into a bit too much of a spitfire, no? We give her too much freedom in these mountains. I fear for the day when restrictions will dampen her spirit and life will weigh heavily on her lithe shoulders."

The worry in her eyes gnawed at him. Her energy seemed to drain with the absence of her child. If only he could light the same spark in those eyes, he thought wistfully. She lived for her daughter, and for her daughter alone. Without Hayame, Arme shuddered to think what would become of the noble lady sitting on the chaise he'd carved out of walnut wood. It was the one piece of furniture she enjoyed seeing him work on, giving him new ideas of scenes and characters to add to her treasure. She had taken to lying down much of the time, however, tucked under a rather warm blanket she'd knit with yarn he'd made from spinning wool the past summer. Sometimes, she needed him to be a close friend, but at times like these, it was clear he would have to play the adviser to the queen and not the doting brother-in-law or protective knight.

There were no other roles he was allowed to fill.

"No need to fret, my queen. She is wise, despite her carefree nature. She is also still incredibly young. Her curiosity is hard to sate, her questions often unexpected, and her comments at times too philosophical for her age. Much like you," he winked, earning a slight blush. A roguish adviser, he grinned inwardly before sobering. His next words may or may not be greeted kindly. "She will be the one to save us all in the end, the prophecy foretold; to bring back the lands lost to Kimbaru and his heathen horde, will she not? It is time to teach her the skills that will become a dire necessity all too soon," Arme stated with a query in his tone, though it broke his heart to speak so frankly of what was to come. If there

was anyone who would bring back the peace and goodness in their world, it would be the child he embraced each night before bed, telling her stories of their ancestors bold.

Biting her lip, Hayadusta sighed. "Is it not too soon?"

"I fear soon it may be bordering on too late."

"She is still so young and believes in the good of the world. She cannot understand what weight she'll have to carry, what responsibilities she will be made to take on with grace, despite her struggles. Her emotions dance on her face. Forcing her to learn to guard that part of her..."

A sigh. Shuffling, as the queen stood, hands wringing.

Arme said nothing, watching her.

"She knows she will one day be queen. Of that I have made certain since her birth. I knew I was a princess and rebelled against my role in this world. I felt what was to be deep within my bones. Or perhaps I was a foolish youth with romance in her heart and her head in the clouds." A wry smile followed her words, and he found himself wanting to meet the woman she was before she became queen. "I know I speak in circles. I know I contradict my own rebellious youthfulness by thinking thus. But how can I allow a child, a girl who should be spoiled and pampered, to be taught to wield a weapon in war? To strategize battles her very life depends on? How will you even teach her? You've never really been in battle yourself..." Hayadusta questioned him as she paced the room. "She's so very young..."

Stiffening at the thought of a battle that was not so far off in the future, he fought to keep his own feet rooted. It would not do to agitate a sickly mother more than he ought. Thoughts churned. How long would they survive? Five or seven summers he would need to raise her right, he surmised; to teach her all that he could and ensure she had the strength and maturity to take the throne. It was almost laughable with his lack of experience, just as she pointed out. Weak she may be, but the queen would have to be recruited in the task. After all, she was the one to break character,

with many summers of experience trading blows, albeit in protected quarters. They would have to teach one another, he realized. And within a few summers, at that. No matter how he pledged to protect her, Hayame would need to know what to do and when to do it. Seven summers would suffice, he nodded in silence, and then they would have to strike. Perhaps he could stretch it a little more.

"Eight summers we have with her, my queen. Eight summers to love her, to nurture her, and teach her that despite the battle which looms ahead, she will always be this very child who runs wild over hills and mountains. To inspire in her compassion, and the strength with which to kill without mercy. She must be able to..."

"Eight summers! She will be but a child of fifteen!" Hayadusta cried out. "It is too little time, Arme!"

"And yet, that is the time I can feel within myself will be right. I cannot say how I know, and of course I may be wrong. But the goddess whispers answers to my soul. My calculations should be correct, and even with added time for us to be able to allow for her mind to grow with her body. She must ascend the throne before reaching maturity. As much as I wish we could wait longer, we cannot. With each turn of the seasons, life becomes worse for our people. The raiding and marauding have not ended. The slaughter still occurs. She will be old enough to take a crown but still young enough to save her innocence then. Whatever we can salvage from the war itself. And with that innocence, she'll perhaps protect that of her people's. With her guidance, and yours from the shadows, perhaps we can bring back the Golden Era."

He wanted her to understand, was desperate for her to understand. He did not want this to be their cruel destiny. His heart rebelled. The seething queen before him only heard one thing: she had less than a single decade to love and enjoy her daughter as she was. A handful of summers to hold her close to her bosom before their destinies ripped them apart. Hayadusta would be regent, as the only child of the late king would ascend those steps and sit on a throne of obsidian as dark as the night. A throne that had seen

both blood and joy but remained standing even when the rulers fell to sword and treachery... and sometimes old age. She would ascend and their world would shift immeasurably, with little left to salvage but their memories of happier days beneath Ar's rays.

Eyes full of fire and the wrath of the gods themselves shot daggers at him. "You cannot decide her fate! You cannot know the pain losing her will bring! There are things you will never know. Things beyond your ability to grasp, despite what you are. I know what needs to be done and this will be my decision to make. You are not her father!"

It was as if a snake had lashed out at him, poisonous to the core, and the attack was nothing short of deadly. Wide-eyed and thin-lipped, Arme responded in a voice devoid of emotion.

"Whether you rage against the heavens or strike down those who love you most, the truth of my words cannot be changed. My niece is my daughter in my heart." His back straightened, eyes of the soldier he had newly learned to be boring into hers. "While you deem it fit to injure me thus, I would remind you I would rather die a thousand deaths by Ar's hand than see a single hair missing from her head. She is like a phoenix, born when the creatures mated last. Her eyes tell the story in their violet shimmer. Her demeanor may be innocent, but there is something within that would command respect, even at this age. Perhaps, I even see a darkness for her to harness. Her strength already is unexpected, and she has beaten my son repeatedly when he thought to raise her ire. A spitfire, she is, just as she should be. A weak queen would lead to chaos and despair. Instead, she will be a queen to be reckoned with, Kimbaru's army beware. Now, you will excuse me as I check in with the children. Mine and yours, my queen."

Stiff-backed and eyes trained forward, Arme bowed and stalked out without waiting for a reply.



Hayadusta had seen all that her friend spoke of in a dream. A dream that had haunted her, much like those that had begun to taint her nights, and sometimes her days. Things only a priestess should have been privy to, realistic scenes of the future. Images she did not want to know about eating away at her sanity.

So, when Arme spoke of his plans, she knew he was right the moment the words left his lips. Her Hayame would face trials beyond their imaginations. It was madness. It was unacceptable. How could she allow it? And yet, a part of her mind, a part not currently drowning in the heavy pounding of her heart, thanked Ar and Haya anew for allotting her at least that amount of time. She would not last long after her daughter took her reign back from the usurper. It was something she'd known, the vision in her sleep taunting her. At least now she had a timeline to adhere to, and she knew fifteen summers was not too young. Boys often saw their first battles before that. May Ar protect their journey ahead.

She sighed in surrender, despite her raging emotions, and hurried after the man who had sworn to be their protector when she had thought all was lost. He had not gone long when she caught up, her now old but still refined gown swishing in the sudden gust of wind that threatened to topple her the moment she stepped outside. The coins on her forehead jangled, the jade bracelet on her wrist, her favorite gift from her husband acquired after chancing upon a merchant from the East, clanging against the silver bangles adorning entirely too thin wrists. She shivered slightly but remained thankful for the warmth of the long sleeves and high neckline of the traditional Harranian wardrobe. She had a few newer pieces Arme had managed to pilfer but sometimes wondered if her luxuries from her days in Aratta were nothing but a distant dream.

"Arme, please, I could never mean to hurt you."

He slowed for her to match his step, reverent of her majesty. His responses still surprised her after all the summers spent sharing a hearth. A mountain palace that lacked for naught stood all around them, caverns dug deep in different areas to house all their needs.

Multiple mountains with a valley in between they called home.

"It matters not, my queen."

He turned to her, eyes ablaze in almost complete gold. She felt her body stiffen in response. The beast within him lurked close to the surface when his emotions were raw. Yet, he would not hurt her. Never that.

"However, I would beg of you not to utter similar words in the future. I cannot bear the thought of losing you or Hayame." His confession tapered into a whisper, eyes burning with pain and a passion that Hayadusta understood all too well. He would protect them all, no matter the cost to his person. He would go down protecting them, lighting the world up in flames. She could see it as clearly as if written on parchment in his favored red ink.

Contrite, she lowered her eyes. "You have given Hayame, our child, everything you were able to. I would never ask for more."

He'd given them more than she could have thought possible: his soul. He was bound to them as no other and would rise above any pain she may cause him, because he was nothing without them. She understood that well, and yet Hayadusta found a certain thrill in seeing it affirmed. She knew she held him back; knew that he could be so much more for the realm. Perhaps, with her death, Arme could come to his full potential? She shivered at the thought. What would a *dakhanavar's* potential be, though? The gods rarely sent instructions with their creations.

"Stop now before your thoughts take you down a darker road," he admonished, stepping closer to place a steadying hand on her shoulder. She looked down at the cool fingers that squeezed ever so lightly, the tan flesh on her deep red clothes. The color matched him, she mused for a moment, derailing her thoughts. Red would always suit him. Red and gold...

Lifting her gaze to his, she smirked. "And what dark hole would I be falling into, my dear?"

He did not share her attempt at levity.

"I know your thoughts, Hayadusta. I can read you like a tablet, perfectly inscribed. You see things I do not." When she began to protest, he lifted a hand. "You keep your secrets well, my queen. Know that Haya has never been far, and the fires of Ar still burn in me. Yes, I can control it most of the time, but I know the darkness in your heart for it is reflected on my soul."

He spread his arms, and she stepped into them readily, her foolish breaking heart finding its balm in his embrace. When the bards would later sing of their queens of old, Arme would not be there, even as a whisper by his queen's side. She felt the truth of it. Arme would never be known as the queen's steadfast companion. He would forever be the phantom warrior who protected a dynasty and the legacy of the mating of fire birds. Later, when the wars had been fought and won, the daughter he considered his safe on the throne and his son leading her armies, the *dakhanavar* would be but a whisper in the wind, forgotten as the sage elder giving comfort to a queen once revered by all. For now, though, in a time and place where history would never document, a creature held in his arms his brother's wife, the last queen of a dead Hayara, and she wept for a future she could see in her mind all too well, and so could he. When he was no longer needed, he would truly be dead and gone, and perhaps so would she...

Hayame will face many trials before she's even near the obsidian throne. Will she manage to defeat Kimbaru alone? What does it truly mean to be Blood of the Phoenix or a Child of Haya?

Discover the continuing saga in *Child of the Phoenix*

Suggested Reading

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Thank you again for reading and don't forget to review! As an indie author, this means a lot to me. I read every review and will be sure to incorporate your suggestions in my upcoming work!