

Chapter 1

Men sneer, calling the Jade Lantern nothing but a glorified whorehouse. Yet here they are, slamming down tankards, hollering for more. Most are locals, dressed in stiff, sweat-stained Kyndo garb, brown as the soot streaking their faces. They drink to forget life—or what remains of it—outside these four walls.

The inner quadrant sits in a valley at the base of the mountain, carved by water over a millennium ago. The river still trickles...just barely, given the boiling summer we've had. Unable to transport waste out, the air down here reeks of death. Rotting bodies left to fester in the sun, feces and urine trickling from above, the stink of sweat and garbage curdling in the heat.

And the soil has long since dried out, picking clean the deposits of ore and other minerals that once supplied our livelihood. With no more veins to follow, most of us have turned to less honorable trades, myself included.

But a few stand out in red cotton and arrogant smiles, blades proudly on display at their hips. They scan the tavern and the rooms above, hands twitching near their blades, eyes sharp with performative focus. New recruits. And not from here, judging by their smooth complexions.

A cool breeze sweeps the open courtyard, carrying the faint scent of plum wine and the stench of something sour. Aunt Kim perches in her corner like a wolf scenting blood. Her eyes are trained on the upper level, flinching each time a door slams shut.

A cold knot forms in my chest. I straighten, glancing up at Vy—my sister in everything but blood. The air has stilled, yet her waist length hair still waves, catching the amber light. She's bright in every possible way—every way I'm not. A smile that steals hearts; wide gleaming eyes, a laugh so melodic you could dance to it.

I look down at my hands which are relatively clean save for the dirt caked under my nails. But flashes of memory cause me to flinch. Blood-stained, cut and scratched, there have been numerous occasions when Vy spent hours scrubbing my skin raw while I sobbed uncontrollably. But that was a long time ago, and I don't cry anymore, at least not for the lives I take.

It's necessary, I tell myself. They deserved it. That's why you don't cry.

But it's a lie. Life in the inner quadrant scars, not just the skin, but the heart. Maybe one day, I'll cry for someone that's not Vy. Until then, I'll keep doing what it takes to give her the life she deserves. Because I'd sooner take a blade to my throat than let *this* become Vy's life.

A slow tightening crawls across my skin, not from the cold, but from watching the way the women move, how practiced they've become at dodging danger. They weave between crowded tables,

porcelain carafes in hand, trading pours for coins. Their silk gowns ripple behind them, meant to distract and entrap.

An erhu twangs sharply somewhere above the chatter. And laughter stirs around us: rehearsed, bright, brittle. It scrapes under my skin, but my mind drifts anyway, to what's waiting.

Today, I'm Mira, an orphan. Tomorrow, I'm Mya Rimal, a High Lord's daughter.

A soldier. A stand-in. A *Ghost*.

I didn't enlist for the Kingdom, couldn't care less if it burned. Hell, I'd set the fire myself for the right amount of coin. But lucky for us, at twenty-two, conscription becomes mandatory. The lottery decides who goes to war, unless you can afford a proxy. The rich post covert ads. The poor answer, trading their lives for a stranger's. A death sentence, dressed up as salvation. One hundred thousand shillings, if you live. Half if you die.

I keep telling myself I'm ready, having met death before—having *been* death before. Maybe if I say it enough, I'll start to believe it.

The sharp slam of a door above snaps me back. I grip my spoon tighter, and a sigh escapes before I can stop it. I glance up, but Vy only swallows hard, picking at a loose thread on her tunic. She's nervous too, just hides it better than I do.

Some of the girls stopped by earlier, asking why I came in today. I lied and told them I was here to collect one final paycheck. Truth is, it's the meat stew: salted pork, star anise, and the comforts of home. The memories creep up, sticking in my throat, but I force them down along with the broth. I raise my hand again, spoon nearly at my mouth—then it's gone.

A tall shadow eclipses the flickering flame light. Irritation simmers beneath my ribs before I even look up. Her pink silk sleeve, drenched in jasmine and spice, reaches over the dented table for my bowl.

Han.

My hands ball into fists. Heat flashes behind my eyes.

She gets under my skin like no one else. Probably because we're too alike, both hardened by tough choices, clawing to make it another day. But I'd rather be sliced open than admit that.

"*Mira*," Han hisses, almond eyes narrowing. She drops the utensil hard enough to splash stew, then whips her sleek hair across my cheek like a slap, softening as she turns to Vy. "Can't you help your sister look less like a cavern rat?" Her dark eyes flick back to me, rouge painted mouth curving into a sneer, her voice sweet venom. "She's scaring away customers, looking like that."

"I wasn't finished," I snap, lips curling. "And if you have a problem with us sitting here, take it up with Aunt Kim. It's not my fault she has favorites."

Han pretends not to hear me. "I heard the news, Vy," she says with a smile, setting the platter down to pinch her cheeks. "The girls and I are so proud."

“Don’t patronize her,” I spit. “You’re barely older than us.”

Han cocks a brow at me. “Learning new words are we?” I scowl as she turns back to Vy, pulling a velvet purse from her lilac bodice. “We pooled what we could scrape together for you.” Metal clinks as Han presses the pouch into her palms.

“I can’t take this,” Vy whispers, face blanching. Her eyes flicker to the closed doors above, knowing full well what they do to earn the coin.

I pull a face, the words coming out before I can stop them. “Like a few shillings will help.” I realize my mistake and promptly clamp my mouth shut, but Vy kicks me under the table anyway.

“Of course you can take it,” Han says, stroking Vy’s silky hair like she’s a prized mare. “Smart, kind, beautiful. We always knew you’d make it out of this shithole. Just promise you won’t forget about us when you make it to Dynang.”

I snort, crossing my arms. “Vy’s not the only one leaving tomorrow. *I’m* the one risking my life.” Vy inhales sharply, and the words snag in my throat. I didn’t mean it like that, but she just winces.

“What do you want? Praise?” Han glares at me, picking up the tray.

I roll my eyes. Han’s never liked me. Not since I stumbled in here at thirteen, running from guards and too stupid to know I’d run straight into a brothel.

“A piece of shit wrapped in silk still smells the same,” Han says, her voice dripping with contempt. “Just because you’re pretending to be some High Lord’s daughter, doesn’t make you one.”

“No need to be bitter, Han.” I make vulgar gestures under the table, gripping my dagger with my other hand. “Not everyone can be born with class.”

Han’s eye twitches. “You think you’re better than us because you don’t earn your keep the same way we do. But are you more honorable?” Her tone is even, but every word has teeth. “We trade our bodies for coins. You trade other people’s lives.” Han starts to pick up Vy’s dishes. “Have you ever asked why Aunt Kim likes you so much? If it’s a good thing she took you in as her little pet?”

I say nothing, because there’s nothing to say. She’s right, and we both know it. But it doesn’t mean I have to like it. My mouth opens, but Vy shakes her head. I wait for Han to disappear into the crowd, then give another vulgar gesture.

Vy pretends not to notice, and for a breath, neither of us speaks. Then she digs in her pouch, pulling out a necklace: green sea glass threaded with leather. “I got you something. Went all the way to the temple to get it blessed.”

I arch a brow, already reaching for it. “Where’d you get coins for the offering? Everyone knows, those pious-pretending monks bless nothing until their pockets do.”

Vy drops it in my palm. “Aunt Kim gave me two shillings, wants you to come back alive.” She tilts her head toward the corner, careful to hide the tick in her jaw. “You like it?”

I nod, placing it around my neck. Eyes turning up to see Vy spin the onyx blade—a nervous habit. But I don't stop her. It's my fault she's on edge. Instead, I glare at Han for taking away our spoons. Vy tracks the twirling dagger with her almost-violet, crescent-shaped eyes.

I scan the soldier's forearms, hunting for the black-inked runes that mark Captains. Dangerous, sharp-eyed, pretentious little shits with little tolerance for Ghosts like me. But it's not like the Kingdom cares who's in uniform, as long as someone is. And aside from the handful of men huddled in the corner, none are marked.

Thump.

The oily drunkard falls backward with a groan, elbow knocking the dagger's hilt. It skids, edge-first toward my chest. My right hand shoots up, blocking it. Cold steel bites deep into my palm, and blood begins to well hot between my fingers. Vy grunts, pushing the stumbling drunkard off our table.

I clench my jaw, stew churning in my gut.

"*Shit, Mira,*" Vy whispers, prying the dagger from my grasp. My gaze drops, though my heart doesn't slow. She wipes the blade clean against her grey tunic. Her fingers are steady now, faking calm as she cuts off a thin strip of fabric.

A hiss escapes me as air hits the gash. The blood keeps coming, warm as it hits the crease of my elbow. My eyes dart around the tavern. But the soldier's cups are empty. Their eyes hazy with drink.

My breath catches. On the opposite side of the courtyard, one of them glances our way. My heart leaps as he slowly lowers his cup, eyes locked on us. I hold my breath, hoping something else has caught his attention, but the tavern hums on. "Vy..." I whisper through gritted teeth.

She flinches, digging through her tattered pouch. "I know. Don't draw attention."

My eyes settle back on the soldier, the one pretending not to look. The shadow of the overhanging ceiling cloaks his face. His comrades, squeezed shoulder to shoulder, avoid his gaze—a Kyndo sign of respect. Or maybe it's just fear. I glare, willing him to look away, but he doesn't.

Vy's voice dips into a plea, causing my chest to tighten. "You don't have to do this, Mira. We'll find some other way."

I tear my gaze away from the soldier. "Healing college costs twenty thousand shillings a year." Vy presses the homemade balm into the wound. I clench my jaw. "There's no other way. Even if I saved for a decade, it wouldn't be enough."

Aunt Kim did let me work the floor here once. But after I threatened to slice the balls off some handsy patrons, she relegated me to the back. I'd have taken her offer if it were only me. A kitchen hand makes a respectable living, but respect does not cover tuition.

I cast another glance in the soldier's direction to find him already looking back. Only his broad chest and swirls of ink peep through his rolled-up sleeve. Not just a soldier—a Captain. *Shit*. My stomach twists, but I say, "People do this all the time."

Vy wraps the cloth around my hand, but the Captain doesn't break his gaze. Neither do I. He lifts his cup, but doesn't drink. Just holds it.

"Not women," Vy counters, voice tight with worry. "We aren't usually conscripted."

"Lucky for us, Kyndo's losing the war." My palms begin to sweat. "Besides, it's simple math. If I succeed, we get the full payment. If I get caught, you still get the deposit, and I get a cot and two hot meals a day."

"*In prison*," Vy growls.

"If I die..." The words catch, and a lump lodges in my throat.

"It's not fair," Vy snaps, louder than she meant to. Her fingers tremble against the cloth. "They'll just post another ad if something happens to you. Like you never existed. *Like you were nothing*." She swallows hard. "Shengi burns entire villages for land they don't even need. Their soldiers don't take prisoners. They don't care if you're rich or poor. They're brutal, ruthless."

"I can be ruthless," I say, though the words scrape my throat like glass.

Vy exhales hard, the breath rattling her chest like a tremor. "No, you can't, and that's what scares me. You're a good person, Mira. Even when you pretend not to be." She presses harder on the wound than she needs to, but I don't flinch. "You've seen what war does to stand-ins. They leave needing coin and come back empty. There's a reason they call you Ghosts. "

She's right. No one's ever prepared. Not until you stare death in the face. "I've seen worse," I mutter, swallowing down the memories creeping up again, noticing tears in her eyes.

"Mira," her voice breaks. "I know it wasn't easy raising me. But I'll make you proud. I'll finish first in my class. I'll save so that we can open our own shop in Dynang, just as we always dreamed. Just...focus on staying alive."

My throat tightens, but I force a smile. "Promise you'll live well. Then we're even." I'll bear the guilt, the shame, and the blood-stained hands as long as she doesn't have to. As long as one of us makes it out. Because *Vy* is worth the blood.

"We'll never be even," Vy murmurs. The silence afterward says everything neither of us can bear to voice.

I shift in my seat, eyes scanning for the Captain, who's now nowhere to be seen. *Maybe he didn't see. Or maybe he's already deciding what to do about it.* My attention turns back to Vy, though something in my gut tells me I'm not done being watched. "Do you have everything packed for tomorrow? Books? Clothes—"

Vy holds up her neatly tied bundle, face grim. “All packed. And you?”

I shrug, masking the pit forming in my stomach. “Just need to cut my hair to match the identification card. The military hands out everything else—clothes, swords, boots.” I squeeze Vy’s hands. Her knuckles dig into my palm, but I don’t pull away. “Promise me you’ll write?”

Vy nods, jaw clenching. “But you can’t.” Confusion must be written on my face because Vy continues before I can ask what she meant. “If you write, I’ll expect it. And if the letter gets delayed...” her voice breaks. “I wouldn’t be able to focus. If you don’t write, then you’re alive. Until they tell me you’re not.” The words come out hoarse, and Vy quickly wipes away her tears before anyone sees.

A sob claws at my throat. Don't let her see. If you cry, she won't go.

But the surge of emotions rises within me like a tsunami. My legs shake as I stand. “I’ll be right back,” I manage to choke out, reaching for the dagger. Vy’s fingers brush my wrist, but I don’t dare turn around. Weaving through the crowd, a scream bubbles on my lips.

I push the rounded wooden door, gasping as soon as the night breeze hits my lungs—it shuts behind me with a thump, swallowing up all light and sound. The street beneath me tilts. Stew turns in my gut. Tears begin to flow freely. Clamping my hands around my mouth, I let out a strangled sob.

It doesn't matter if you die. One year—twelve months—three-hundred sixty-five days. Then you'll have enough for school fees. Enough to move out of Kyndo. Enough for a new life.

I wipe the tears, steeling myself. Only the gentle pitter-patter of scurrying rodents breaks the silence—the shops: dark and barred shut. But above, candlelight flickers, illuminating some windows, casting warm shadows below. I trace the decrepit homes that surround me, each layer of street jutting out of the mountainside like a serpent’s jaw.

My gaze lands on a heated argument at the far side of the small square. Two figures, expertly cloaked by darkness. The hooded one, too slender and sharp-shouldered to be a man, palms the hilt of her short sword. “I need more,” the woman says, voice urgent. “We’re losing too many, too fast.”

The man’s back is turned, but runes flame up his arms. *The Captain from earlier?* I can’t be sure, not from this angle. For a breath, I think about turning around, but something in my gut pushes me forward. Hugging the wall, I dart in and out of shadows. My fingers closed around the dagger’s hilt, not because I plan to use it, but because danger feels near, and my body knows it.

The air is tight with heat and tension, like a spark waiting to catch. I press my back into the silk shop’s stone walls, knees bent behind a stack of broken crates, and watch through the wooden slats.

“I can’t,” the Captain hisses. “It’s too risky. I need more time.”

The woman steps forward, smaller than he is in every measure, but something about her makes him tremble. “There is no time!” the woman snaps, dark green hood covering all but her thin lips and pale

chin. “If you don’t act, they’ll gain control of the strip. Everything we’ve sacrificed will be for nothing. There’s more lives at stake than just her—”

The man growls, cutting her off. Her words snag mid-breath. “I know *exactly* what’s at stake.” His shoulders sag with some unseen weight, but his hand never leaves his sword. “I’ll send weapons as soon as I can.”

I squint, studying the tick of his jaw, the shake of his hands. He’s scared, but not of dying. And not of her, either. I know that kind of fear. It’s the same one that rakes through me every time I think of Vy.

The woman tilts her head, and a gasp escapes me. Shengi eyes, green as the pendant hanging above my heart, burned into the mind of every Kyndo soldier. Irises that inspire children’s tales of monsters—of witches.

“Don’t forget, *Kai*,” she says, voice low. “I own you until your debt is paid. And it is not paid until we win the war.” She steps back, flashing a smile that’s all teeth. “Maeve just got treatment. It’d be a shame if she...stopped responding to it.”

“If you touch a hair on her head, I will *gut* you alive,” he snarls.

Maeve: a name, a reason. I could empathize with that, doing something desperate for someone you love. And one flick is all it would take to erase his debt. My grip slickens with sweat. But if I kill the woman, Maeve could fall sick again.

I grip my dagger so tight my knuckles throb, chest pulling taut like a bowstring. The Captain shakes, rage flashing in his eyes. The woman takes a half-step back.

He exhales sharply, voice calm. “You know threats are not necessary. I’d help you regardless.”

My breath catches. He’s not trapped; he’s *willing*.

On second thought...I’ll turn them both in and reap my handsome reward. Might fetch more than what the Rimals ever offered for replacing Mya.

I slip between pools of darkness, the lanternlight leaving golden puddles on the cobblestone. A sagging canvas awning dips low above me. Crates stacked to my left reek of rotting meat and something I’d rather not name, but they shield my outline well enough. My boots scuff loose gravel as I settle into the corner between the apothecary and the butcher shop.

The Captain’s eyes flicker to the shadow I’m hiding in.

Shit. Does he see me?

I need to be quick. Just one clean throw to cripple her. I coil my arm back, shoulder twitching with the motion I’ve practiced a hundred times before. Unblinking, I readjust my grip, palm sticking to the leather-wrapped hilt.

The snap waits at my elbow. The dagger ready to launch.

Chapter 2

A scream erupts, slicing through the stillness like a cleaver. Sparrows burst from tiled rooftops, wings flapping frantically against the stars. Rats skitter across my tattered boots, disappearing into the cracks between walls. I stand at the edge of the square, ten paces from the Captain and the Shengi woman. The traitor and the spy. The scent of yeast and burnt sugar clings to the stall behind me, thick as a warning. I lower my arm, just slightly, dagger still poised.

“Fucking cunt,” a man slurs, staggering forward. “You think you can cheat me? Give me what I paid for.”

A girl cries out—barely eighteen. She stumbles back, heel snagging on her lilac dress; the white ribbon at the end of her braid slips loose, tumbling to the ground. My eyes dart around the square, but aside from us, it’s empty. *Idiot*. Everyone knows that if you can’t fight, you don’t walk alone. Not in the lower quadrant, *especially* not at this time of night.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about! Let me go!”

Footsteps thunder to my right. The spy bolts, her cloak snapping behind her like a whip in the cold air. *Shit*. I move to intercept, but the Captain’s drawn his sword. He doesn’t chase after her—his eyes are locked on the tavern entrance. I track his gaze, and air rushes from my lungs. The ogre of a man, glassy-eyed and snarling, fumbles with his belt. One meaty hand pins the girl’s shoulder to the wall.

Rage simmers in my gut. The scene drags me back to a different alley, a different night. Vy, barely breathing, dumped by parents who believed it was her bad luck that they couldn’t bear a son. And standing over her were two soot-covered men. They thanked the Gods for their *gift* as they began to undo their trousers—they didn’t get to the second button.

“Please. No!” The girl bawls, kicking and clawing.

My chest hammers as chaos splinters around me. I glance at the Captain, then back to the ogre looming over the girl. But the Captain doesn’t hesitate. He dashes forward, sword raised. I swallow the scream rising in my throat.

The spy’s not far. I could catch her. Turn her in. Get my coin. End this tonight. But the girl cries out again, and I make my choice. I let the spy’s cloak vanish into the night. Her fists beat wildly against the ogre, but it’s useless. My feet pound pavement, and cool air burns my lungs.

The ogre drops the girl, turning toward the Captain with a roar. She staggers sideways, then crumples to the pavement, trembling. I bolt forward, inhaling the stench of piss and plum wine. Their swords collide in a shriek of metal: the ogre lunges, breath reeking, footfalls cracking old cobblestone. The Captain grits his teeth, boots slipping on scattered gravel as he parries and pivots.

“Get out of here!” I scream over the sharp clangs.

The girl doesn't move. I curse, hooking an arm around her calves, and drag her onto the main road. She blinks, dazed, then scrambles to her feet and sprints across the square. She pounds on the wooden door, retching in the gutter. I wait for her to enter her home, then turn back to the clash of steel.

The Captain sees me now, eyes flashing—fear, maybe. For me? For himself? I can't tell, but the vein on the side of his neck pulses as he dodges a brutal strike. I hesitate, just for a second. If he falls, and he might, the ogre will get away. And the next girl might not scream so loud. Might not be so lucky.

I duck low and aim for the throat. There's no point in fighting fair, not at five foot two. The ogre stiffens, and the Captain finishes him off, ripping his sword free with a wet squelch. The man, reeking of booze and blood, folds like a sack of grain, hitting the ground with a thud.

Chest heaving, the Captain wipes his sword on the dead man's tunic. His eyes flick to the dagger lodged in his neck, then back at me. If he's surprised, he doesn't show it. Just files it away, quiet and calculating. My fingers twitch, heart thumping. Without the Shengi woman, I have no evidence that he's the traitor I know him to be. And that means nothing will change tomorrow. Maybe I could torture him for proof. I've certainly done worse for less.

The Captain brushes his palms on his uniform, then tussles his hair like he's bored by the whole ordeal, every second a performance. Torchlight crackles, casting amber shadows that dance over the Captain's face, highlighting the sharp lines of his cheekbone and the specks of blood on his collar. He bends over, digging his heel into the ogre's ribs, and yanks out my blade. A crooked smile tugs at the corner of his mouth when he catches me staring. I scowl, reaching for my dagger, but his expression shifts. He frowns, eyes darkening. But I won't be fooled. Whatever games he's playing, I'm ready.

"Your hand," the Captain breathes, stepping in fast. He grabs my wrist. I try to pull back, but he holds it firm. "You're bleeding." He leans over, breath warm and sweet. But no plum. No booze. Did he come down here just to meet the spy? Or maybe he came to the Jade Lantern for their other services. Either way, I shouldn't care.

I follow his gaze—a mistake. Shock hits me like a boulder.

I slump against the stone wall, cold and damp, grounding me as shock sets in. The cut must've reopened when my fingers gripped the dagger. I stare at the raw, red split across my palm.

"It's deep. Needs cleaning or it won't heal right." He hovers at my side, hand almost at my shoulder, but hesitates. "Don't go anywhere. I'll be right back."

The wound pulses, crusted at the opening. I slide onto a stack of crates, hand held outstretched. Sharp pain stabs at my palm, and time blurs as the seconds drag on. I start to rise, but a firm hand pushes me back down.

"Don't stand. You've lost more blood than you think." The Captain stands before me, brows knit tight. A convincing actor, I'll give him that. "It needs to be stitched."

A bundle clinks to the floor: liquor, thread, a spoon, and a needle. I can feel the color fade from my face as my stomach churns. I've seen worse: blood, death, mess. But it's different when the blood is mine. I try to slide off the crate, but the world tilts.

"You just helped me kill a man," he says with a dry laugh. "And you're afraid of a needle?" He straddles my legs, knees pressing into my thighs.

I continue to writhe, spewing more blood.

"Hold still," he grunts, eyes flicking up. Faint lantern flames flicker nearby, sending jittery shadows over his face. "Name's Kai. You were inside earlier, weren't you? What's your name?"

My jaw grinds. Part of me wants to snap back, push him away. But another part is tired. His gaze lingers, waiting for an answer I won't give. Arrogant bastard. Pretty smiles and gentle eyes won't distract me.

Kai reaches for something, and a wave of nausea slams into me. I shake my head hard, pulse pounding in my skull. "Bite this," he says, holding up a spoon. I open my mouth to protest, but he jams it between my teeth before I can. "Where'd you learn to fight like that?" His tone is too light, like someone who's lived too long beside death. "You jumped in quick."

I grunt around the spoon. Kai reaches down again, this time for the bottle.

"You think she'll be okay?" he asks, glancing at the door the girl disappeared through.

I shrug. She's from the inner quadrant. She'll be shaken, but she'll live. Hopefully, she'll think twice before going out alone.

Without warning, he pours the plum liquor. Fire licks my raw flesh. The taste of metal fills my mouth with each ragged breath. My fingers curl reflexively, but he forces my palm open, pouring more onto the cut. Thankfully, the spoon muffles my cursing.

"That's some colorful language." His lips twitch, almost into a smile. "Didn't take you for the foul-mouthed type."

I glare, chest heaving. Every instinct screams at me to stay alert, but the sting of the liquor and the press of his hands make it hard to think straight.

"I suppose I owe you one. That fight was closer than I'd like to admit."

His fingers tighten as the needle bites deeper. I jerk, biting down harder, eyes stinging with the promise of retribution. Kai doesn't flinch, just lets me claw into this thigh.

"How long have you worked at the Jade Lantern—"

My pulse roars, drowning him out. The needle pierces my skin again and again, each stab sending sparks down my arm. Thread tugs, pulling tight, the wound folding in on itself like puckered lips. Sweat beads on my temple, and white spots obscure my vision. I only breathe again when his lips brush my palm, cutting the black thread with his teeth.

I yank my arm back, ripping the wrap from his hands, and glare at him. He doesn't flinch, just bends to gather the spilled contents of the bundle, thread and dark blood sticking to his fingers. My hand twitches toward the dagger at my side. Just a flick of the wrist would do it. Blame it on the chaos.

Kai's eyes snap up. I freeze, quickly fumbling for the cloth. "It needs to be wrapped," he says calmly, eyes flickering with curiosity as he studies me.

I try to knot it one-handed, but the fabric slips.

Kai arches his brow. "Quiet and stubborn. Not the best combination for staying alive."

If I talk, he could recognize me, place me if our paths cross again. That is, if I let him go. But he did help the girl, and that's not nothing. I hand him the wrap, careful not to meet his eyes. A truce, for now.

"There." He leans back, but I don't relax. Kai's touch lingers a second too long as he ties the bandage tight. His body remains too close for comfort. I shouldn't notice it, but I do.

The tavern door swings wide, flooding the vacant street with golden light. It catches on broken glass and a trail of bloody footprints. Laughter and the sweet tang of stew roll out from inside: loud, drunken, utterly unaware. Vy stumbles out, wide-eyed and searching. Her chest rises with panicked breaths, hair whipping as she scans the square. Then she sees me, *sees us*, and stills.

Too late now. I let out a heavy sigh. Vy's here, and I promised myself I'd shield her from this—the ugliness, the weight of what it means to end a life, to part with a bit of your soul. But here I am, blood on my hands.

Kai, still kneeling before me, rises quickly. Vy helps me up, eyes flicking to my torn trousers. I give her a nod: *I'm fine*.

Her attention snaps back to the Captain. She exhales sharply, clearing her throat. "What happened?" Her hands are warm, trembling slightly as she grips my elbow. I let her steady me.

Kai rubs the back of his neck. "Needed some fresh air when I heard the commotion."

Liar.

He nods toward the alley. "I saw him get kicked out earlier. Piss drunk when the girl walked past. Stopped her, thinking she was one of the workers. He was about to..." His voice trails off. "Then your friend showed up and dragged the girl out of harm's way."

Kai glances at my hand. "But she got hurt, sliced her palm. I sewed it up. Just make sure to keep it dry." His eyes flicker with something I don't dare name. "Your friend's brave, stepping in."

Vy doesn't hesitate. "She's my sister."

I almost laugh as Kai's brows knit together, eyes darting between us: Vy—tall, regal, honey-skinned even in a place like this; then to me—freckled, sun-worn, calloused.

“Not by blood,” Vy adds, shifting to support more of my weight. “We grew up together.” Her eyes sharpen to the markings on his arm. “Why are you in the Capital? I thought new Captains were forced to spend two years at the front.”

Kai’s expression hardens. “New? No. I enlisted early, already finished my time at the front.”

Vy and I exchange a look.

“I’m not just passing through,” he adds, locking in on me again. There’s something in his look that I can’t quite place. “I’m here to recruit.”

Then he shifts, and something gleams beneath his collar—a polished silver insignia shaped like a phoenix. “I’m a Commander,” he says evenly.

My stomach knots, and I forget to breathe. Vy goes still beside me, though her fingers bite into my hip.

Kai’s eyes narrow at the blankness in our expressions. “I’ll be in charge of the next wave of training. Picking up the new recruits tomorrow.”

He’ll be in charge of training *me*. But that’s not the part that makes my blood go cold. The reward for turning in a Commander would be significant. Enough to escape this life. Enough to buy freedom outright. My heartbeat thunders with hope or a warning. Maybe both.

Chapter 3

Mira

The tavern feels different now—warmer, but not in a way that welcomes. Heat clings to my skin like oil. Chairs scrape against the wooden floor, and the last of the patrons stagger past, filling out into the empty streets. A few stumble toward the wide steps leading to the inn, no doubt expecting other services. Or so they think. But none of Aunt Kim’s girls are forced. Most often, they wear nightsbane on their lips—silencing men with a kiss until morning. Sometimes longer.

It took over an hour for the Guard to arrive. They hauled the bastard away in a single-wheeled barrow, his bulk flapping over the side like a gutted hog. Too efficient, too routine, as if they’d scraped blood off the tiles a hundred times before. And maybe they had given the Jade Lantern’s precarious location.

Kai gave the report, carefully excluding any mention of me. But he hasn’t moved since he came back inside. His eyes are locked on mine. I sit, pretending not to see him. But I feel his gaze with every heartbeat. The cut has dulled to a throb, but my pulse won’t slow. Irritation simmers beneath my ribs.

Did he see me back in the square earlier?

If he suspects I overheard, then that would make me a threat.

But if he doesn’t, I could gather evidence, turn him in, cut my enlistment short.

Kai doesn’t blink, doesn’t move, doesn’t breathe like he’s waiting for something. I’m halfway out of my seat, ready to confront him, when Han glides over, each step a performance. She’s changed. Her dress is sheer and blue as the summer sky; her hair, a braided nest—beautiful, intentional, trapping.

Han taps her feet, eyes narrowing. “Aunt Kim would like a word.” She waits, not smiling.

I peer over her shoulder at Aunt Kim, cold and unreadable.

Vy stands, too, but Han holds up a hand. “Just *you*.” Her eyes settle on me, then she turns to Vy. “Your room is ready upstairs, love. Mika will show you up in a minute.”

“We agreed on coins for cleaning. I’ve told Aunt Kim before, we don’t need housing—”

“If you’d just come, she’d explain,” Han snaps, eyes flashing.

“It’s okay,” I assure Vy, who’s hovering above the bench. “I’ll see what she wants.”

Vy settles back down slowly as Han leads me to the back of the tavern, heels clicking with every step. The muggy air curdles around me as the girls ascend the wooden staircase. Bile rising in my throat as they flash shy smiles, playacting sweetness for men who scramble after them like dogs.

Kai’s gaze burns into the back of my skull as we turn toward the green double doors leading to Aunt Kim’s quarters. I glare back, but he smirks.

Traitorous bastard. I'll show him just where he can shove that smile—

My thoughts splinter. I run straight into Han's perfume-soaked braid and stagger backwards. Jasmine explodes in my nose as she whips around, scowling.

"Leave us." Aunt Kim waves her hand dismissively. She doesn't look up, doesn't need to. Her desk is a shrine of ink and order, every shelf lined with neatly labeled ledgers. She gestures to the crimson armchair.

I hesitate, then lower myself into the cracked leather. It bites into the back of my thighs, and the faint scent of incense coils around me, heavy and sweet enough to burn.

Han shoots me a look like she wants me to choke on it, then turns, pasting on a sugary smile for the glossy-eyed men. One's wrinkled like a prune; the other flashes a grin through yellowed gums. She gives them a wave. A cold shiver runs down my spine as they follow, like mutts in heat.

"Don't mind Han," Aunt Kim says, voice tired. "She's just upset you stole a customer in her section."

I whip around, pulse stuttering. "*What?*"

Her eyes lift briefly from the parchment. "One of the men thought you worked here as one of my girls." Aunt Kim gives me a once-over, shaking her head. "I told him no, but he insisted."

"*But?*" My stomach twists with disbelief. Cleaning for coins—that was the deal, not this. "You took his offer without asking me?" I lean forward, ready to pounce.

Aunt Kim holds up a hand. "Before you get all twisted. He paid up front." Her gaze falls to the parchment, her voice flat. "More than any of these lousy regulars."

Heat floods my face. Aunt Kim always said everything has a price. I just didn't think *I* would be one. "I don't care how much." The air thins, tight in my chest. I can still feel their prying hands, the suffocating stink of sweat and booze. "You don't get to make that choice for me."

She cuts me off, voice sharp. "One thousand shillings."

I blink hard, sinking back into the chair. "One thousand. That's a month of rent." The weight of the number presses down like a stone in my gut. It's significant, an amount I can't say no to. The cushion's seams dig into my leg, but I barely feel it.

Aunt Kim nods. "I know. I take a ten percent cut. And another five to keep the guards off our backs. Threw in the room for Vy, free of charge."

She slides a leather pouch across. My fingers tremble as I press my hands into my knees to steady the restless tapping. The coins clink sharply against the worn table. I exhale, slow and shaky, then reach for the pouch. It's heavier than I expected, in a way that has nothing to do with coin. For Vy, this is for Vy.

Aunt Kim turns back to her parchment. "There's a vial of Nightsbane inside. Though...you might not want it."

I wipe my clammy palms on my tunic. “Who paid?”

My gaze lands on the old man five tables to my right, slumped over, drool pooling in the nook of his arm. Then, the soldier near the door—young. He doubles over, face ashen, clutching his stomach.

“The soldier,” Aunt Kim replies, voice flat. She doesn’t even look up, just flicks the beads on her abacus and records a string of numbers.

I grimace, watching the boy dry heave. “He won’t make it up the stairs.”

Her eyes flick up, lips curling with disgust. “Not him.”

I try to swallow, but can’t. There’s only one man left.

Aunt Kim jerks her head. “The handsome one.”

Of course it’s him. My blood turns to ice. I turn slowly, pulse thrumming. The traitor’s eyes pierce mine. He raises a brow, lips curving.

“You know,” I laugh, too thin, setting the pouch back on the desk. “I don’t actually need the coins that badly.” Not if he’s planning to slit my throat tonight.

Aunt Kim sets down her peacock quill and leans back in her seat. “Need I remind you what you’re doing tomorrow?”

I bite my lip, refusing to look over again. Maybe he’s more cruel than I thought. Giving me an offer I can’t refuse, so that he can interrogate me or worse.

“I’ll make you a promise.” She leans forward, hands clasped tight. Her face is still unreadable, but the vein in her neck betrays her. “If anything happens to you tomorrow, Vy will have a place here if she wants it. I’ll care for her, like she’s one of my girls.”

I blink. “Why?”

She pushes forward, busying herself with the ledger. “You remind me of myself,” she says almost proudly.

I start to scoff, but swallow it when she shoots me daggers with her eyes.

“These girls, *my* girls, live a decent life. They’ll never be rich or carefree. But they will be *safe*.” Aunt Kim points to the corner room upstairs. “Mika’s Pa beat her, threw her in a ditch. Her back was raw, split open like meat. *We* mended her, gave her a family, a home. When her Pa showed up here, demanded I give him her earnings—” She looks up, eyes distant before steel returns. “I killed him myself. Buried him in the rosebushes,” she continues, nodding to the courtyard. “I don’t feel remorse.” My blood freezes over as she pauses. “No, that’s a lie.”

I exhale sharply.

Her eyes glint like she’s remembering a fond memory. “I wish I had killed him sooner.”

My breath catches. For a heartbeat, her fingers tremble. Then, she snaps the ledger shut. I observe Aunt Kim, not knowing if she's a monster or a mother. And if she thinks we're alike, what does that make me?

Aunt Kim continues, voice cold as steel. "Han, who you despise so much?" She tilts her head to the room four doors to the right. "Orphaned at five with two younger brothers. She raised them alone. They're guards now. Send her coin each week, pretending not to know how much she loathes what she does to earn it."

I shift in my seat, feeling the guilt gnaw at me.

She drops the next stack of parchment onto her desk like a sentence being passed. "There are nineteen girls who work for me. Each of them's got a history like yours, pain like yours. You're not special, and neither is your sacrifice."

"But that doesn't make *us* the same," I whisper, eyes settling on the pouch as it teeters on the edge. The truth settles like sand in my throat.

Aunt Kim clicks her tongue against the roof of her mouth. "I raised you here. You don't think I know you, child? How many lives have you taken in Vy's name?" I swallow hard as her eyes flare. "My girls, *your sisters*, that you sit and judge every night, are not sheep. A lion cannot raise sheep."

For reasons beyond my understanding, the hairs on my arms raise, and my pulse quickens.

Aunt Kim smoothes out her already flawless bun. "You, my dear, are a lion. Vy is too if given the chance." Her voice softens, I think. "We all make choices, Mira. Do what you need to. Kill him if you must. Just make sure you don't have regrets."

My fingers brush the pouch, pushing down the wave of nausea. I nod once. Not in agreement, but because there's nothing left to say.

Kai

The oak frame creaks as I lean back, aching arm braced behind my head. Jasmine clings to the sweat-stale air. Too fresh. Someone else was here, not long ago. And a single candle flickers weakly in the corner, casting restless shadows. The rough wool cover scratches at my skin, and I shift again.

Everything in this room mimics comfort—the bed, too large for one, too small for two; dull velvet curtains meant to distract from cold walls; a dresser no one uses. All of it, hollow. My right foot rests on my knee, taps a slow rhythm as I trace the splintered ceiling above to still my racing thoughts: ten beams, five cracks, ten paces to the walls. Four pillows. A desk. A basin. A window. A mirror.

What was she doing in the square?

How much did she hear?

Did she see the Shengi woman?

I'm a Commander. Youngest in the ranks. Ruthless, or so they say. I earned my position. There's no way she could've followed me without my knowledge. I push myself to a seat, stomach twisting.

But better men have been bested by hubris. I could've made a mistake. If she had seen, wouldn't she have reported me already? Ousted me for coins. No. She couldn't have seen me. She's one of the girls here. Not a soldier. Not trained to notice things like that.

Yet, the way she fought. Too precise for someone who's never killed before. Perhaps she's a spy, sent by the Emperor. She's certainly beautiful enough to be in his court, and deadly enough to belong there.

I fall back into the bed, the weight of it all pressing into the mattress.

Fen's words echo—*there is no time*—leaving a bitter taste in my mouth. I could say something. But who would believe me? I wouldn't believe it either—if it weren't etched behind my eyelids every time I close them. The real reason this war with Shengi began. Not trade routes. Not territory. Just one truth, buried in blood and fire.

I close my eyes, trying not to see it again. But it comes anyway. A cold sweat breaks on my forehead, and I let out a dry laugh. How quickly life can spiral out of control.

I'm a traitor because of Maeve. Because I promised Ma nothing would happen to her. I didn't know Maeve would fall sick. Didn't know smuggling Shengi medicine would land me in the crosshairs. Didn't know keeping my promise would be tantamount to treason.

But I'll be the first to admit, the Emperor is an excellent strategist, telling every citizen that the thin strip of land belongs to Kyndo. Painting Shengi as merciless and corrupt while keeping the Kyndo people underfed and underpaid, making them desperate enough to fight for fertile land with the promise of a better economy.

A cold knot forms in my gut. So many lives lost to feed the Emperor's greed. So many more lives would be lost if the Emperor succeeds.

I shove the pillow over my face. The rose oil chokes me, but I scream anyway. I'd enlisted early because I bought the lies, wanted to fight for my Kingdom, for its people. The guilt picks me apart, slowly stripping away my sanity. And like everyone else, I never stopped to ask which side started this war...or any war before it. Never wondered who attacked first.

I know helping Shengi isn't wrong. If Kyndo wins, we all lose, so the war must end. But supplying the enemy with weapons, while sending our boys to meet their death at the front. I'll surely pay for that in hell.

I rise again, running a hand through my curls. This is just my paranoia playing tricks on me. My chest clenches. Facing those boys tomorrow, naive and inexperienced, knowing half of them won't make it home. That's why I'm on edge, though something in my gut tells me otherwise.

She doesn't know anything. There's no reason to question her or make threats. Besides, I'm not that kind of person. Stitching someone up one minute to buy their trust, then letting them bleed out the next. I'll tell Aunt Kim I made a mistake. Put a stop to this.

I stand, reaching for the handle to leave, but it clicks before I touch it. The door creaks open on its own. My eyes flick behind me to the window, unsure if I want her to take the bait or not.

She steps through, and I freeze. A lump forms in my throat. She stands in a sheen midnight blue slip. Unmistakably deliberate. And for a second, I forget why I was at the door. *Mira*. That's what Aunt Kim had said her name was. My heart slams against my ribs—a command to run. But I don't move. I don't want to. Her hair, brushed straight, gleams against the flickering sconce flames. Eyes wide, she tilts her head and gives me a once-over.

Mira, I repeat in my head, allowing her name to curl around me. The door snaps shut. Her face is blank, but her chest rises too fast, too deep. My eyes sweep over Mira, assessing for threats. An ornate bracelet weighs down her left wrist. But the right is stiff, held behind her back. Too still to be natural. My eyes flick over to the mirror I angled toward the entrance, just enough to catch the glint of steel. Just enough to know I've run out of time, because behind her back is a dagger.

I try to swallow, but a laugh bubbles up.

Kai Feng. First time in a brothel, last night alive. Fucking perfect.

Chapter 4

Mira

My pulse stutters as Kai gives me a slow look over, biting back a grin. Still in red robes, though they're fresh: crisp with sharp lines and no longer blood-speckled. His hands are clean too, clear of dried crimson. Droplets of moisture cling to his dark hair and the shadows of the room highlight his already sharp cheekbones, making him look like something forged, dangerous and beautiful.

The bracelet slides to my elbow, snagging a hair. I resist the urge to lick my lips, the bitterness reminding me of what's at stake. I steady my grip even as my stitches scream in protest, forcing a breath in. The cramped room stinks of incense and something sour I'd rather not name. My fingers tighten around the dagger, eye twitching, rethinking my plan.

Maybe I won't waste my breath on threats. Maybe I just plunge the blade into his neck and be done with it. Take my chances with enlistment without having to worry about looking over my back. But if he dies, someone will just replace him, and I'd have no leverage. They could catch me, kick me out. I need him alive, need him convinced I don't know he's a traitor. Or at least that I won't turn him in. That's the only way I'll be able to gather enough evidence to expose him. Once I do, I'll walk away paid and clear.

Kai straightens, brushing back his hair like we're just two strangers. A singular flame throws both our shadows against the wall like ghosts. My shoulders stay rigid, just because he's not lunging at me doesn't mean he's not thinking about it. I force the sweetest smile I can muster, but he just smirks. My blood simmers, but I keep smiling.

"How's your hand?" he asks, shifting toward the narrow desk, eyes fixed on me.

"It's much better." I bat my eyes like I've seen the girls do, even as I imagine driving the blade straight through his smug mouth. "Thanks to you." My eyes sweep the room as we circle, mapping every weapon in reach, which, thanks to Aunt Kim's foresight, are lacking.

Kai arches a brow, unimpressed by my efforts to seduce. "So you *do* speak."

I take a step forward, but he carefully side-steps, spinning so his back is at the door. My heart thunders. *I had forgotten to lock the door.* His eyes flick from the door handle to the reflection. My eyes snap to the mirror just as his thumb presses the latch. The dagger tucked at my side, fully in view. *Fuck.*

"You can keep the money," he says quickly. "Tell Aunt Kim, I've changed my mind."

I step forward, pressing my body into his, pinning him against the door. My fingers reach behind his torso toward the lock, but his hand blocks it. Kai's face is calm and smug, but his heartbeat hammers. He certainly knows I have a weapon.

"Really," Kai's voice pitches, eyes darting to the mirror. "No services required. Let's just call it a night."

Heat coils low. I shove it down, whatever stupid, human thing it is. Too sore, too dizzy, too fucking tired to keep playing nice. "You can't leave," I say, pressing the dagger's tip between his ribs, face blanching as I feel the stitches stretch. "Not yet." I need more time to figure out what he knows.

His smirk falls as his body stiffens against me. I dig my foot into the floor, preparing for a fight. "You're not one of Aunt Kim's girls, are you?" he whispers, breath curling like smoke, as he searches my face. "Fast. Clean. Precise. No way you could've taken that giant down without proper training. Where'd you learn? Palace guard?" His eyes sharpen. "Assassin? How long have you been following me?"

I scoff. "Do I look like I have palace coin?" My fingers flex, tapping the numbness away. "Every kid that grew up on the streets of the inner quadrant knows how to fight, or how to run. And don't flatter yourself, I wasn't following you. Just happened to be there at the right time."

His eyes narrow, gaze flicking down to the blade pressed at his side. "You're bleeding again. You'll pass out before you scratch me."

I try to stand tall and hold my ground, but my knees threaten to buckle. Kai snorts then smirks, noticing the daze in my eyes. He moves fast, and my hand instinctively jerks back. The dagger clatters to the floor, skidding under the bed. I curse, quickly curling my hands into fists, and stagger back a half-step.

"Who sent you?" He pushes off the door. "The Emperor? Are you one of his spies?"

My fists lower just barely as black creeps in at the corners of my vision. "No one sent me," I growl. "You paid for me, remember?" The words fall flat, hollow in my throat.

Kai laughs. "You always bring a blade with you?" He begins to circle me, slow and deliberate. "Maybe you should sit. You look pale."

I bite the inside of my cheek, willing the blur to sharpen. My legs barely keep up. "Precaution," I wheeze. "Lots of dangerous scum down here. All the girls carry weapons." Poison soaked hair-pins. I would've worn one too, if my hair could hold style like theirs.

"What do you want from me?" he snaps, eyes flicking to my legs as I sway.

I bark a laugh, unconvincing. "Why'd you request my services?"

His jaw tightens, grinding together like he's trying to decide what to do with me. Then Kai lunges. I raise my fists, bracing to be knocked out cold. But instead of a blow, I feel a shove. My knees fold, and I fall back onto something soft. The bed. My brow furrows tight as I try to figure out what his next move is.

Kai drags a hand across his face and exhales, annoyed. "I'm too tired for this. Come at me again, and I'll kill you." I stay seated, watching him. Something in his face says, *don't push it*. Kai stands before me, sleeve pushed up with his arms crossed. "I won't attack you if you don't attack me. Fair enough?" He takes a breath, then asks more calmly, "Why'd you try to stab me?"

I don't answer. Just trace the swirl of runes snaking up his biceps, the cool ink pulsing faintly beneath my gaze, as if alive with secrets. The monks gift them for protection, though everyone knows they're just marks of rank. I'd never seen one up close—never realized how intricate the swirls were. Thin lines that loop and curve within them, layered and endless. Seers dedicate their lives to interpreting them, claiming they're a map of a person's life. That if you look close enough, you can see your lover, your death. Superstitious fools.

The room hangs silent for a heartbeat, then Kai begins to tap his feet slowly. A faint smile curls at the corners of his mouth, breaking me out of my trance. "Would you like to admire me some more, or are you ready to answer my questions?"

I scowl, adjusting the wrap that's fallen loose. The runes mark more than rank. They're a warning, a promise of strength and danger. I know better than to forget what his markings mean.

He watches me fumble for a few breaths, then exhales, slow and resigned, before kneeling and extending a hand. I consider kicking him in the balls and making a run for it, but something in his eyes, part warning, part amusement, makes me hesitate.

My breath catches as he presses his thumb into the wound, holding the wrap still as he winds it around my hand. Pain flares under the bandage, sharp and hot. The space between us shrinks, suddenly too close for comfort.

His eyes flick up, gold flecks catching the candlelight. "An answer for an answer."

I swallow down the heat, gritting my teeth, "You first." I twist the bracelet, careful not to let the vials of antidote show.

Kai presses his thumb into the fresh stitches at the base of my palm. Pain jolts up my wrist. I flinch, trying to pull away, but his grip only tightens. "No," he says, pressing harder. "You."

A growl rips from my throat. Fire flashes in his eyes, but he eases his grip.

I press my lips together, debating how much to give up. "Vy's smart. She got into healing college, but we can't afford it." My voice is quiet. "I agreed to take the place of some High Lord's daughter tomorrow as a stand-in, as a ghost. Trading my life for Vy's." The truth tastes bitter on my tongue, or maybe that's just the Nightsbane. "I wasn't trying to eavesdrop," I add, tone light, "but I saw you with the Shengi woman." The best lies are threaded with truth. He doesn't need to know I'd sell him out with a smile the second I have proof.

Kai doesn't say anything, though his jaw ticks—a confirmation.

“I wanted a trade. My secret for yours.” I meet his eyes, feigning innocence. “I didn’t catch anything incriminating, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Kai ties the wrap and releases my hand, brows arching. “If you didn’t hear anything useful, what threat were you going to make?”

I rub my palm, trying to erase the heat of his touch. “As I understand it, Commanders are right hands to the Generals. They may not imprison you without proof, but they’d still have to investigate. You’d be under watch. And that would make it hard to get treatment for...what was her name? It started with an ‘M’.” I tap my chin, pretending to think.

He bristles.

“Oh right, Maeve.” I smile. “So I won’t raise the flag, and you don’t expose me tomorrow. Fair?”

He shoots me a look of pure disgust.

I tilt my head. “So, what *were* you doing with the Shengi spy?”

His eyes narrow, but then he shifts, sitting back on the bed. He leans against the post, just out of reach, rubbing the back of his neck. “Maeve’s my sister. She had green pox,” he says, voice hollow. “Nothing here treats it.”

A stone drops in my stomach. If the Gods are real, they’re cruel to create something like that. I remember the smoke first, then the smell, burning corpses in the streets of the inner quadrant, primarily children. Flesh sloughing off bone—sulfur and rot. The water ran brown, and there was never enough wood to build the pyres high.

My eyes search his face, trying to decide if he’s lying, but his gaze stays down. He swallows hard before continuing. “So I got it from the enemy.” He clears his throat. “Maeve’s eleven now. Strong, too. But the pox—” He runs a hand down his face. “It took her ability to walk, tore the muscle straight off her bone.”

I sit on my hands, teeth clenched against the urge to soften, to reach out and comfort him, even though I know it would betray everything I’m here to do. Vulnerability is a luxury I can’t afford, not tonight. “If she’s better, why were you with the Shengi woman today?”

His eyes lift, regret and something else flickering in their depths. “Maeve’s in a lot of pain. I’ve tried everything I could get my hands on in Kyndo, but nothing here helped.” Kai shivers, eyes darkening. “There was a month where I was stuck at the front,” he says quietly. “I had the medicine, but couldn’t find a way to get it back to her.” His voice cracks. “She was *ten*, and she begged me to end her life.”

My stomach turns and bile rises to my throat. Kai doesn’t notice, still caught in memory, as he nods to the shadowed windowsill. I follow his gaze. There it is, tucked just behind the curtain. Maybe he did earn his title, after all. I hadn’t even seen the bag.

“I meet the woman to pick up the medicine.” Kai draws in a sharp breath, then bites his lip. I wait for him to say more, but he doesn’t.

My eyes flick to the maroon bag, too bulky for mere medicine. As sorry as I feel for Maeve, Vy comes first. Something’s off. My fingers twitch. There’s more in there. There has to be, but he won’t just let me look. I’ll need him to be out cold.

I’d hit him over the head with the hilt of my dagger if I could reach it, but it’s under the bed, and any sudden movement would give me away. Choking him might work, if not for my injury. Besides, I don’t know if he was bluffing when he said he’d kill me for trying again.

After a beat, Kai speaks, voice firm. “I won’t expose you tomorrow. I can understand doing something out of desperation.” He pauses. “As long as you don’t raise any trouble.”

Nightsbane is the safest option. Just a kiss. That’s all I need: a smile, a whisper, a tilt of the chin. The girls make it look easy, but the bile’s already in my throat. I can’t fake softness—not with him. My pulse hammers, warning me this is a stupid idea. Kai stares at me, puzzled. And the weight of what I’m about to do presses down. I glance at the bag, my way out of enlistment, and into a new life. I take a trembling breath, then—

I throw myself at him, tasting the bitter edge of the poison on my tongue—better not to give him time to say no. But the moment our lips meet, warm and tender, my stomach knots. I don’t know what I was expecting, but it wasn’t this. My lips part, just slightly, before Kai freezes, breath hitching, eyes wide.

He raises his hands slowly, palms outward. “What are you doing?” Then holds me at arm’s length, breath ragged.

Heat floods my cheeks. My mouth opens, but nothing comes out. I blink hard and send out a silent prayer, hoping that was enough for the Nightsbane to kick in.

Kai’s eyes search mine, and my heart catches in my throat. “I don’t want it like this.”

Kai releases me, then runs a hand through his hair, gaze turned down. I look for a sign: blurred vision, slowed breath, dizziness, but find none. Maybe I should’ve used more.

“Really. Keep the money.” He gestures at the door, voice hoarse. “I won’t out you tomorrow.”

My mouth dries, then wets again. I study him, looking for an indication that the drug has taken hold, but he just picks at the lint on his uniform. The contents of my stomach churn at the thought of having to kiss him again. And not because it was horrible. But because it was not.

“I’m not doing this because you paid me,” I say quieter than I intended, inching forward. Not a lie, just not the full truth. I’m doing this because I need what’s in the bag.

Kai doesn’t look up, though the tendon in his arm twitches. “I don’t believe you,” he whispers, flexing the muscle in his jaw.

My pulse drums into my ears as I take his chin into my hand. His stubble scrapes my palm, and every instinct tells me that if I continue, there will be consequences. But I push those voices down. Kai lifts his eyes to meet mine, and inside them, a storm gathers. His hands are balled into fists at my hip as I hover over him.

My chest clenches. Hopefully, he won't hold this against me, though it won't matter if I get my hands on damning evidence.

I lean forward, inhaling amber and citrus, and pretend to hesitate, allowing the poison to pass from my lips to his. Kai holds his breath, trembling beneath my touch, his lips warm and soft as velvet. I hold still, refusing to acknowledge the real reason behind my thundering heartbeat.

Kai's shoulders release as he exhales, and his eyes flutter close. Mine don't. For a breath, we're locked in place. Then he pulls me flush against his firm body, causing the air to rush from my lungs. Kai shudders, and my resolve begins to melt.

He brushes his tongue along the seam of my mouth, and thought evaporates. My fingers lace through his hair as he kisses me—hard. Heat flares everywhere we touch, sharp and sudden. I don't want this, my mind screams. But my body doesn't listen. It answers his pull, greedy and willing, forgetting what's at stake.

I sweep my tongue across his teeth, tasting metal and heat. He bites and sucks on my lip, pulling the Nightsbane deeper with every breath. Our tongues push and pull. For longer than I'd like to admit, I forget what I was after. My stomach twists when his tongue pauses mid-movement, confusion flickering in his eyes. Kai pulls back, brows furrowed.

I watch as he fights the pull of sleep, shame clawing at my throat. Not because I used him, but because when he stopped, a part of me wanted more. Thankfully, my lack of self-control isn't put to the test today. In a breath, his eyes snap shut, hands still wrapped around me. He held out longer than I expected, but he wasn't immune.

I shrug Kai off with shaking arms, pulse hammering. Relief and regret churn through me, a storm I don't have time to face. I pull another vial from the bracelet Aunt Kim had packed in the coin satchel, the second dose of antidote. The muddy liquid sucks all moisture from my tongue, dragging the fire out.

My feet hit the icy floor, sending a chill down my spine. I lower myself, arm outstretched for my dagger, feeling blindly until I find the wrapped leather hilt. The rush of blood in my ears cuts out, and a sharp exhale escapes me as I allow my cheeks to press against the stone, cooling the heat that wrapped around me moments before.

I push to a stand, eyes flicking to Kai, who's snoring now, and reach for his bag. Glass clinks softly as I set it on the bed. My fingers shake as I undo the knot, quickly memorizing how to tie it back.

The fabric falls away, and a stone forms in my gut—a hundred tiny vials. Neat. Labeled. Harmless-looking. I drop to the foot of the bed, running my fingers across the contents, willing something to jump out at me: a sign, a secret, anything. But there's nothing I can use.

I cast another glance at Kai and groan. I'll still have to enlist tomorrow, and I've probably just created an enemy out of the one person who could help me.

Chapter 5

Kai

I groan, rolling onto my side: same itchy cover, same creaking bed, same cold room. But still alive and free. I'll take that as a win. I push myself up, hand dragging through my hair. Head pounding and pulse quickening, my eyes flick to the bag. I pat my chest, searching for the parchment I had stashed there, and let out a sharp sigh—relief and frustration—when I find it still tucked away. Boots on, I cross to the windowsill, nodding once at Mira's handiwork. The complex knot is retied correctly, though she underestimated how much dust she'd stir up. I pocket the bag and use the tiny basin to freshen up. Regret sinks in with every breath.

Everything about Mira screamed at me to be on guard: the scent of lilies and smoke, that sheer midnight dress, the fire in her eyes. I could've lied, and maybe I should've, but I didn't. Because it felt good, too good, to share the weight with someone, even if she was just looking to use it against me. Then her lips pressed against mine, the taste of her tongue sweet and bitter with Nightbanes. And all rational thought escaped me.

My hands dip into the chilly water, then over my face, trying to wash away the scent of her. It doesn't work. I dunk my face into the basin, screaming silently as icy water spills into my mouth and burns down my throat. But her touch lingers: at my chin, on my lips, in my hair.

Another groan escapes me as I pat my face dry. I finish quickly, hoping motion will silence my thoughts. But the air feels heavier than it should be, like I haven't exhaled since she left. I grab my sword from beneath the mattress and rest one hand on the metal door handle. I let the chill bite into my skin. Pressing my ear against the wood, I listen—silence. I take a steeling breath, then pull.

The door swings open with a groan. A ray of morning light hits my face. I blink hard, shielding my eyes with my arm.

“Good morning.”

“Fucking hell!” I stumble back, heart racing. If Aunt Kim doesn’t train spies, maybe she should.

“Did you enjoy your stay?” The girl smiles with a tilt of her head, voice even and a pitch too high, her hands tucked inside the sleeve of her lilac cotton gown.

I scowl as she slides, blocking my path.

“Aunt Kim would like to know if you’ll be staying with us again.” She bats her almond eyes, though it doesn’t fool me. “We’d be happy to host you with your pick of the girls. There are plenty of other services to choose from as well.” She flashes another smile.

My stomach twists, watching the performance. “You can drop the act. Where’s Mira?”

The corners of her lips fall, and her eyes flash. She clears her throat, voice lowering as she answers. “Mira left earlier.” I open my mouth to ask a slew of other questions, but she cuts me off with an irritated look. “I don’t know where, when, why. No, she won’t be back. Breakfast is being served downstairs. Anything else?”

“Han,” Aunt Kim calls from below. The girl glances down, nodding that she heard.

“And Vy?” I ask, tapping my foot, itching to get out of here before anyone from my legion asks why I stayed the night.

“Doesn’t work here.” Han gives me a once-over, gaze cold enough to freeze the breath in my lungs. “You’re the Commander?” she asks, though her tone tells me she already knows the answer.

I nod slowly, eyes narrowed. Han takes a half-step closer. I try to step back, but the wooden door digs into my spine. My fingers wrap around the hilt of my blade, but she just arches a brow. Sweat begins to bead at my temple, and not from the sun.

Each word she speaks drips with venom and a promise. “Mira will get through inspection today. You will make sure of it.” Her voice, low and fierce. “And if you tell her I said anything, I will find you and cut out your tongue.”

A look flashes across her face, worry buried beneath the razor edge. Like she’s fighting to keep Mira safe in the only way she knows how. Han falls back onto her heels as the door beside us creaks open. Her mouth curves into a smile, and like a doll, it doesn’t reach her eyes.

“I hope you’ll visit again,” she lies, gesturing toward the stairs.

I move around Han with caution, feeling the damp railing seep through my shirt. Our eyes lock. Each of us with our own silent warning until I reach the top steps. Below dishes clatter and cups clink, normal sounds that feel strange while I’m caught in this web. A gust of heavy air curls up the stairs, carrying the scent of packed earth, signaling the end of summer and the start of something colder.

I walk briskly past yawning patrons, eyes peeled for members of my legion. The girls weave around me bringing steaming pots of tea and bowls of rice porridge. Their rustling cotton dresses remind me how far I am from home. One of the girls glances my way, eyes flickering with recognition before she turns to a waiting table.

I’m five paces from the door when a familiar voice calls me from across the courtyard. “Commander,” Wren shouts, his deep voice something I’m still getting used to. The echo of his footsteps cuts through the morning stillness. He slows as he reaches me, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. “I didn’t realize you’d stayed the night.”

I straighten just as his firm hand claps my back. “I’ve told you to call me Kai.”

“Ah, you know my Ma wouldn’t like that. Besides, I don’t want the others to think I made Captain just because I know you.” Wren gives my shoulder a squeeze. “I thought you were heading back yesterday.” He grabs two buns from a passing platter, tossing a shilling to a girl who staggers to catch it. “Want one?” Wren holds out the fluffy white pastry, the other already at his mouth.

I take it without a word and push open the arched doors. The world bursts in: street merchants shouting, trolley wheels clanging rhythmically on gravel, children laughing as they run through the square. All signs of yesterday’s violence seem wiped clean.

But then the smell hits: fish and something sour, grease and flecks of metal, sewage and sweetness. Ash rains down from above, though the sky is cloudless. The air curdles with the promise of death or disease. My crisp tunic is already riddled with smog.

I force my thoughts back home—to lush pastures, dense forests, fresh earth—and tear into the soft bun. Sweet and savory, it dissolves instantly. I finish it in two bites and keep walking. Eyes tracing the winding cobblestone, searching for the transport up the mountain, but it's hidden around the curve.

“How'd you find this place anyway?” Wren asks between chews, jogging to keep pace.

No longer lanky and gaunt looking, he garners attention with each step. War has filled him out, made him rougher and more solid. At least on the outside. To me, he's the same kid. Always chattering, always trailing five paces behind. I turn just in time to see him wink at a group of young women who erupt into giggles.

“Either way,” he says, dusting off his hands. “Fantastic place. Great service.”

I shoot Wren a look and trudge up the inclined road, boots sloshing against green waste.

“The food,” Wren adds quickly, dodging the prying hands of beggars. “Food was great. I didn't partake in anything else. No trouble with the ladies, see,” he says, nudging me with his elbow, then pulls a pitiful face. “Still, I was surprised when I heard the girls whispering. Didn't believe it 'til I asked one of them myself. Must be lonely at the front to blow a whole paycheck on one night.”

I choke on the bun.

Wren doesn't notice, just keeps talking. “It's not that hard. I could give you some pointers,” he says, smiling at a woman who glares back at him. “Then maybe you wouldn't have to pay for it. Saw the girl slip into your room. Pretty, but not your usual type. You usually go for the wide-eyed ones. Easy on the eyes, light in the head. Maybe that's the problem.”

“Wren!” I snap, spinning on my heel. My eyes flash. I debate whether to put him in a headlock or to strangle him right here in front of everyone.

Wren swallows hard then presses past me, chattering away again. “Four hundred recruits lined up today. It's a good thing, isn't it? Heard some of them'll even be women.”

My hands drag across my face as I follow after him. Ma made me promise to protect Maeve. Aunt Ida made me swear to watch Wren's back. One day, these promises are going to get me killed.

Chapter 6

Mira

The air is too clean, too crisp, too sharp. It scrapes against the back of my throat, leaving it dry. Or maybe that's just my nerves. I swallow hard and use my arm to block out the sun, hot despite the chill from the gentle sea breeze.

The recruit before me steps forward. I follow, taking another steadying breath: salt, brine, seaweed—mixed with sweat and the faint iron scent of nerves. The sea glitters below us like shattered glass, but no one dares look down.

My gaze falls over my shoulder, to the winding snake of nervous bodies stretching along the cliffside: shoulders hunched, eyes darting, some muttering prayers or chewing the inside of their cheeks.

The only sound, outside of the rhythmic crashing of waves, is the shuffle of boots on packed earth and the occasional cough swallowed by the wind.

Four hundred and twenty four recruits. Young faces, nearly all men. Uniforms don't come until after inspection, so we wear threadbare travel clothes with packs slung over one shoulder, weapons wrapped in linen or hidden beneath cloaks. Some look eager. Most look sick.

I wonder how many of them are like me, holding false identification cards, hoping they'll survive long enough to reap the benefits of their reward.

My gaze turns forward, to the looming iron gates—twice my height, rusted at the hinges, each bolt the size of a fist. It groans with every gust, like the fortress is breathing. I lean my head back, eyes tracking the cylindrical watch towers rising like stone sentinels, their narrow slits watching without eyes. Like the Jade Lantern, it's a Kyndo engineering spectacle: all sharp angles and brutal beauty, ancient and impenetrable.

I step forward again. Ten paces from the front now.

My knees ache from standing so long. I'd woken before dawn, hoping to drop off Vy and make it here before the rush...before Kai. But it was hard to say goodbye. We'd be inseparable since I found her almost a decade ago, and I couldn't bring myself to leave until Vy was nothing more than a speck in the distance. She'll be in Bansu soon, judging by the steady rise of the sun over the turquoise waters. It's a small town a couple leagues from the capital. Far from the front and safe.

One year, I repeat. Survive one year.

I lean to the left, trying to catch a glimpse of the soldier in front. But only his markings are visible, rows of black-inked rings leading from his wrist to his elbow. Not the Commander. Not Kai.

My stomach twists with unease. I'll need to find another way to earn back his trust, to learn his secrets. That's the only way I'll get out of this early. Hopefully he doesn't resent me too much for poisoning him.

The line stiffens around me as the Captain's voice booms across the cliffside, sharp and sudden as a war horn.

"Fen! We got an imposter."

Shit.

Boots echo against pavement as soldiers approach from the fortress. The young man stumbles back and glances around, wide-eyed. But there's a reason the fortress was built on the cliff. No trees. No hills. Only open pastures as far as the eye can see and the vastness of the sea on the other side. Great for seeing the enemy. Tragic for the Ghost planning his escape.

He hesitates for a breath, before pushing past us, sprinting through the bare field. Tall and lanky, and from the inner quadrant no doubt, he's a runner.

The recruit behind me gasps. I turn, tracking her gaze.

My breath catches as I watch the soldier at the top draw an arrow. The Captain below waves his hands frantically—at the soldier or at the Ghost, I can't tell. But his screams are carried away by the gust of wind. We hold our breaths as the arrow releases, arching through the air. The Ghost stiffens, then falls face first into the tall grass. I don't breathe. No one does. Then someone behind me starts to cry. Not loud,

just a soft hiccup she tries to swallow. No one turns. No one comforts her. We all just keep facing forward, like stone.

The Captain returns to his post, face fallen. He motions for the soldiers to retrieve the body from the field, then continues with roll call as if the events that just transpired were a minor inconvenience. I lean forward onto my toes, gripping my identification card harder. Two recruits ahead of me, and no signs of Kai.

Don't run, I tell myself. You'll be fine if you don't run.

I'm not sure what compelled me to tell Han about last night, but I did. Not that she cared enough to say anything. Maybe I'd hope that it would give me extra leverage for someone else to know Kai's secret. But it's a stretch to think that. The word of a thief and a whore against a revered Commander. No one would believe us.

Maybe I should just give up on trying to find evidence that he's a traitor. Just focus on staying alive. But what if his secrets jeopardize me? That would put Vy's future in danger.

A cold knot forms low in my gut.

"Next!"

My gaze snaps up.