

CHAPTER I

ARAYA

You cannot train instinct. You can only cage it and pray the bar holds — Commander Liyal

The forest-fragranced wind hadn't yet touched the training fields of Nujill that morning. Araya stood in front of her chamber window, her armor half-laced, fighting with her hair that tangled into the hem of the leather. In a groan, she finally freed the final hair strand and exhaled sharply - she could hear the first soldiers starting their training, the clang of the swords riding up to the golden sky. Scattered clouds were indolently fleeing west, to the ocean. A strong grunt caught her attention on the mangohotr that was tearing apart a training mannequin. The animal, powerful, cut through the thick leather with a disconcerting ease. His two heads, well coordinated, tore out the bag between their strong clench; and a myriad of volatile wool flew everywhere.

In a giggle, Araya moved away from the window. Her eyes dropped to the floor, where Lay, her own mangohotr, was lying down, waiting for her to be ready. He raised one of his heads to check on her, and with a shake of the head, she let him know that she didn't need anything from him. Still, he stood and trotted over—expectant. Being careful to not touch the poisonous spikes on its neck, the young woman patted him on each head, before finishing lacing her armor in front of the mirror.

Lay had been given to her a few years ago, and she could remember it like it was the day before. The texture of the shell, like a cocoon, soft and raw at the same time; and then the crack, and the first head reaching out, almost biting her fingers right off. It was a fond memory.

Araya knew that the very fact that she was offered a mangohotr showed the trust and the honor she was receiving from the King. Mangohotrs were used as war-beasts in most countries due to their high intelligence, and unwavering loyalty. It had been observed over centuries that their loyalty was beyond their imprinting process, and often to ideas entangled with royalties and hierarchies.

As a loyal soldier, on the verge of becoming the youngest leader of Huyr'Han history at that time, she was offered one. Even now, at the age of eighteen, she was the youngest captain of the Huyr'Han army. Her entire life had been dedicated to the crown, and she was proud of it.

Styling her chestnut hair quickly in a simple braid, she grabbed the piece of bread on her table and took a bite, heading to the training grounds. Her pod would meet her there soon, but she was summoned by the General

before starting the training. Finishing her breakfast on the go, with Lay following closely, she left her apartment and took the stairs down to the first level terrace, where she was supposed to meet General Korven.

Chin up, hands relaxed, she approached him as he was observing the drill site, and the new recruits' first trials. He had been a solid figure throughout her life, and the respect she had for him was unflinching.

"You wanted to see me, General?"

"Ah, Araya, yes. I need you to escort a cart from the east gate to the west underground."

His eyes brushed the field and the city, simmering from the early morning activity, behind. Araya followed his gaze up to the ramparts and the east gate that was not opened yet; but she could infer the long line behind it, merchants waiting to get to the city for their daily trades, mixed with agents ready to fly to give their reports, and other civilians.

"Yes, sir. How do I find it?"

"It's probably the only one pulled by an eqhiban."

Surprised, Araya paused for one second. Eqhiban were not stealthy – those large magical creatures were looking like horses, but larger, with blades piercing from their shoulders, and large scissors teeth made for a clear goal: shred. Very few had the finances to be able to hire eqhiban-towed carts, especially in Huyr'Han; that was definitely a royal cart.

"Anything else I should know? "

"We suspect someone will divert the cart, or steal what's inside. The target inside must get to the west underground alive. "

"Got it. "

After a short nod, Araya rolled away, pressing her gait in order to be at the gate when it opened. Snapping her fingers to get Lay's attention, she swiftly got out of the castle and slipped into the street, using the early morning shadows to envelop her and be undetectable. Escorting missions were pretty unusual for her, given her status now, and something was telling her that if she was chosen, there was a reason. Was it some of the secret research that was going on in the castle? The west undergrounds were rumored to be the playing ground of Maester Thaddeus, and the only thing she knew about it was that they were breeding the mangohotr there – because this is where Lay imprinted on her. But she had learnt to not question orders and missions, and had become good at gauging when to press questions without undermining authorities. Power plays were not always her cup of tea.

Passing to a main city artery, Araya got submerged into the bubbling energy of early morning, while the merchant stalls were not yet full, waiting for the first trades; the murmurs of the people running left and right to prepare for their day; the smell of freshly cooked pastries, and further east the clinking metal announcing the opening of the gate.

Going by a gate guard, the young captain put a light hand on their shoulder, making them shout in surprise.

“For Te’s sake, Araya, announce yourself before doing this shit!”

Bursting out laughing, Araya winked at the poor guard, holding herself to not make more fun of him.

“Not funny enough!”

The man shook his head, but hardly contained his smile - he was not vexed at all, and maybe even flattered that the captain was playing with him.

“I am going to the observation point. ”

Leaving the guard and its comrades – starting to make fun of him – she climbed the steep stairs to the overlook to scan the line in front of the gate. It was, as General Korven said, not difficult to find the cart: The eqhiban was towering above everything else, so massive it reduced the labor horses to mere ponies. However, the cart was surprisingly simple and minimalist; a large oilcloth was covering the cargo, with no royal insignia, and the driver seemed very uncomfortable, fidgeting on his reins and eyeing left and right.

What was going on?

Squinting to be able to see through the sun’s first rays above the horizon, her gut clenched. Some agitation troubled the calm line further from the gate, and a roaring within the waiting people started to grow.

Araya watched the line crack open, as a fast moving something was firing towards the eqhiban cart...

She had a bad feeling – and needed to do something.

Now.

With a quick glance behind her to find Lay, she ordered sharply.

“Go. Stop it. ”

The mangohotr growled in approval and, in a formidable impulse, jumped to the bottom of the rampart, right in front of a suddenly terrified little boy. Panic started to erupt and screams to echo – but the magic beast was already launched, full speed, towards the unsettling shadow splitting the line.

Araya took just a second to track the scene of her loyal and powerful animal, spotting the cart driver escaping through the crowd.

In a fluid motion, she vaulted over the rampart wall, using gravity and the stones’ rough edges to control her fall, before bolting to the covered wagon.

The massive eqhiban didn’t even flinch when Araya leapt on the top of the cart to scan her surroundings. Her eyes found Lay, mid-pounce, claws tearing apart a cloak of a tall figure, brutally exposing their face...

Revealing probably the most beautiful woman Araya had ever seen. Even scowling, the woman's eyes, rose-pink colored, seemed to drink the world. Her full lips, pinched, gleamed so bright it was almost unreal.

Their gaze locked. Was she even human?

Then, the woman abandoned her cloak and vanished in the crowd.

"Lay," Araya ordered sharply. The mangohotr growled, then dropped the chase and trotted back to her.

Araya exhaled sharply, turning her attention to the eqhiban. The animal's ears were twitching with unrest, and it glanced nervously in the driver's direction... *Empty*. This absence threw off the eqhiban, and it started stomping nervously like a ticking bomb.

She had seconds.

She'd never driven a cart, and if she was able to ride a horse, guiding an eqhiban was definitely not part of her skills. The animal was on the verge of going rampant, and there were too many people - even though a good amount seemed to have picked up on the eqhiban anxiety and were moving away already.

Think Araya, think!

Instinctively, she jumped down, unsheathed her sword and... slashed the lanyards.

One beat.

One second later, the eqhiban reared, unleashing a scream that cracked her skull like a siren wail - a mix of neigh and roar so unsettling it felt like the end of the world. It spun and bolted down the main road, scattering people like leaves. Araya didn't try to stop it: it was the best way to lose a limb. Watching the eqhiban running to the west, she took a deep breath, and the clanging of the gate opening responded to her.

About time!

She climbed back atop the cart, sat still, and waited as the crowd thinned - after all, her orders were to bring the wagon to the underground with what it contained, but just the target. She knew how to tell the difference - and couldn't move the cart by herself, or even just with Lay. The mangohotr stood next to the cart, growling every time someone got too close like a living warning bell. Her curiosity hitched her to check what was in the cart, but there were too many eyes - so waiting was the only good choice.

When, finally, the line was almost completely gone, a pod of three guards trotted their direction. As they were moving, Araya landed softly next to the cart and lifted slightly a corner of the oiled cloth to check inside to soothe her curiosity. It took a few seconds for her eyes to settle for the obscurity under there, and a few more seconds to find...

Low chin, grimy skin, broken nails, mucky hair. A kid - it was a kid. A little girl. Their gaze touched less than a second, and the girl - so young - dropped her chin again. A long shiver rolled down Araya's spine, but before she could do anything about it, a guard voice rang out in the air, and she covered the cart in a quick reflex.

"What happened? "

Araya shook her head, trying to contain the unsettling emotion in her throat. Why was a girl that young a prisoner?

"Everything is under control," she said, forcing her voice to be calm. "Can you get a horse to pull this? "

The guard nodded, turned and loudly whistled its comrades with a sign. In less than a minute, another guard was bringing a heavy horse - and it took all three of them to make something work with the sectioned lanyards.



The west underground was just as Araya remembered - clinical, grey and cold. She passed through the entrance gate, made of bossed metal that smelled so rusty and old it almost seemed soaked in blood. The cart rolled to a halt before a half-wall carved with strange symbols. She could read most alphabets in Unerse, but these signs were eerie and obscure, even if her gut was telling her she *should* know. A shimmer of something moved under her skin, and disappeared. So many questions and bad feelings tangled in her mind - Why this little girl? Had she done something? Did she have some kind of destructive power? And why the undergrounds? Were they going to experiment on her? Was it even normal? Shouldn't she say something? Why was it scraping at the back of her mind like something needing to be uncovered?

She shook herself - she knew she wouldn't get answers - and stepped around the half-wall, finding what she was looking for: a small, copper bell.

The ring, high-pitched, froze her bones and crystallized her thoughts. Lay growled for a second, in response to her unease.

Footsteps, climbing slowly; the stone reverberated the sound in light echoes, almost like in a cavern. Soon, a shadow appeared in the stairwell, and the pale, greyish face of Maester Thaddeus lit by a single candle emerged from the obscurity.

"Ah, it's here. "

It? A burst of anger flared in Araya's chest. But before she could speak, the old Maester lifted a hand to silence her.

"You're done here, captain."

“I...” She stopped before crossing the line – even if she wanted to. Thought. Gritted her teeth as something spread in her chest. Like she guessed, there was no space for questions. Only orders, missions, and deliverables. But she had to try something.

“Do you need any help moving the cargo, Maester?”

Thaddeus clicked his tongue in disapproval, and turned his back to her. She wanted to know. What was that little girl, to be captured and sent there? Something gazed her memory—too fast to catch. Lay whined, and she stepped to him, patting him on the heads. There were only questions - not answers. And maybe it was better that way.

“Our deed is done, let’s go.”

Without another glance back, she left the cold of the underground behind.

She needed some light.



By the time Araya returned to the training grounds to meet with her pod, the sun was dancing in Nujill streets, well above the ramparts. The practice field already bore its first drops of blood and sweat and the atmosphere was thick with flying sand, clashing swords and loud groans.

North of the field where the mangohotrs were training, the air vibrated with their growls, barks and snapping orders. Lay trotted confidently to the supervisor there, with a low bark to get his attention, and Araya watched him take his position on the ground, with so much habit it was touching. At least, he was fine, and back to his routine, and just that soothed her enough for the iron fist in her gut to relax - just a bit. He loved the practice field - being able to use all of his powerful body was deeply satisfying, and what he was meant to do.

Araya took a deep breath - to ground herself and shake the lingering weight of the earlier morning - then marched to her pod that already started sword training.

Rhielle was watching a duel from the sideline, ready to intervene or stop the fight when necessary. The two contestants were twirling around each other, trying to gain advantage. The first fighter was Myee, a female warrior in her thirties, especially versed in archery; the second, Pythre, was a stocky male in his early twenties. His piercing purple eyes were trying to find a weak spot in Myee defense - in vain; he was not skilled enough - yet - to comprehend that his adversary’s open knee was... a trap. Two seconds later, the fight was over and Pythre eating dust.

“What was your lesson today, Pythre? ”

Nine heads snapped towards Araya - equal part surprise, fear, and respect. The tenth individual, Rhielle, her second-in-command, was shaking her head, disappointed.

“Sand is disgusting,” spat the defeated man.

A hard smile stretched Araya's lips.

"Wait until I make you taste horse droppings, you'll know what disgusting is..."

Pythre eyes widened for one second, before he dropped his chin - and spat more sand on the side.

"I need to train my reflexes and my eyes. I realized too late it was a trap."

"And what did you realize when you caught on? "

The man turned his face towards Myee, and he scratched the back of his neck, thinking.

"I think it was something with her balance. She was super grounded, her knee was not open, but rooted open, and she knew what she was doing."

Araya nodded. Pythre had a habit of using derision to wriggle out of tension - but she never bit. Her sharp observation skills could see that from their very first meeting, but she never really discouraged it: a bit of humor was good for morale, and team bonding.

"Get to your footwork, y'all."

Everyone took their position for the exercises. Araya was roaming through the ranks, correcting here a knee, there an elbow, there a tight shoulder. Her pod was quite a diverse one: the youngest had just turned seventeen, and the oldest was in his forties. The memory of when Phug - the oldest guy - was assigned to her was still vivid: she was just seventeen, and from the end of his forties, he was looking at her with disdain - as anyone would have expected. Young adult full of life, she knew that her position was thought to have been arranged more than earned; but it was not. After a few days of murmured mockery — 'what had she done to get a captain position at her age?', 'With a body like hers, everyone could buy a rank...' — she had decided to just own up the rumors and challenged everyone who would like to take her place. First one to try was Rhielle - but she was another female, just a few years older - and then Phug - the veteran, who already went to battle and stared death in the eyes.

The battle was epic – but short-lived. Araya had a clear victor, and the warrior didn't want to acknowledge it; he pushed all the wrong buttons. It took him several weeks before being able to walk, and a few more months to tend to his wounded ego. That's when fear started to show in the back of some eyes; and she was fine with it. Sometimes, respect comes with a bit of fear; as long as she could observe their loyalty in their behavior, there was no problem.

The distinct sound of running stomps snapped her back to reality. Araya's gaze locked with Rhielle – and they both met the light-boned messenger at some distance from the trainees.

"I have this mission order for you, captain."

Her fingers unrolled the parchment handed to her. The king seal was still warm on the paper – fresh from the morning. Only one reason for a mission coming directly from him: they were considering promoting her. She

had requested a reevaluation and it was finally coming. She dismissed the messenger before starting to read, her heart pounding with anticipation...

“Oh wahou, that’s a long journey! ” Rhielle said in awe.

“Yes... If everything goes as planned, we can expect at least two months of travelling before reaching Songhal.”

“But it looks like we might have a dragon caravan? ”

“Caravans like this are too large and noticeable. We need to get out of Nujill first, probably to Doq’Ohu. We can leave from there under the university’s cover. But that will make us land in Okirey at the closest – to not raise suspicion. With the mountainous terrain, that will take at least one month of traveling – by foot. We might have courier dragons, but that depends on how much resources we’ll be allocated.”

Rhielle whistled longly to mark her surprise.

“That means...”

“Yup. We’re leaving tomorrow.”

CHAPTER 2

MYRAN

Subjects demonstrating involuntary magic flare or biological transformation are to be considered unstable, regardless of lineage. Termination protocols authorized. — Narang Registry of Magical Aberration

Red Moon.

Good auspice. That was the belief - and Kalem's ceremony was tonight. The young lupinel had to make a choice, and Myran knew his best friend was confident about it. Who wouldn't be? Most people from his clan were, at least; probably because they had a choice.

He didn't. Never had.

As long as he could transform, he transformed into his black dire wolf.

Everyone else could describe to him how, as kids, they could sense all the transformations opened to them; how they could pick and choose, and run onto a mental trail to meet their canine selection.

Trails that never existed for him.

Raking a hand through his rastas, Myran focused on his friend. He was drawing the ritual symbols on the ground, around the crackling fire. Ashes on sand. Black on white. Stepstones into adulthood. Once the lines were complete, Kalem opened his hands to the sky, and sat facing the flames, legs crossed, eyes closed.

A deep humming rose from the ground – and from the chests of the entire lupanar. The air thickened with magic. Power crawled on Myran's skin, like every time someone was about to transform next to him.

Kalem's sitting silhouette blurred in the shadows. The flames spiked high, rolled out of the pit and engulfed the ritual sigils on the sand; and then everything turned green.

Green flames were burning high, dancing in the night – and it was like being in hell's garden. The wind swirled into the fire; and then suddenly everything was black. Only the red moon aura was lighting the scene, and in place of Kalem, a lycaon was sitting tall.

It howled, and within a second, magic went on a rampage – all the lupanar exploded in transformations, and all sorts of canines were howling in unison. Fennec, jackal, desert foxes... Some of the oldest members transformed with a delay – that marked their magical control, but they still couldn't resist the magic call.

Myran trembled for a second; but his dire wolf within resisted the urge with determination. Like a pillar, magic was rolling around, and not *in*.

Why wasn't he transforming?

The howl stopped abruptly, and all eyes snapped to him. [...]