

The Rhyme of Ranking

“**Gold** we follow, our Empress grand

Who rules o’er all the Empire’s land

Silver voices we must heed

Their wishes thus become our creed

Role of ladies **Ruby** red

Our lives and fashions thusly led

Noble **Azure**, least of lords

Protect well your peasant wards.

Crafts of **Alabaster**, halls of trade

The common and the noble braid

Sturdy **Mud**, who plants the field

Share the bounty of your yield

Hated **Ash**, born of foes

Inherit all the Empire’s woes

So it has been for centuries past

And, Empress willing, long will it last.”

The Sea Blossoms

By Rose Chord

Autumn

Chapter One

Welcome Ball

Kennett watched the candlelight play across myriad jewels and metals adorning the nobles in the ballroom. From his perch behind the curtains atop the grand staircase he saw every twirl of the dancers in sweet unison, distracting from their perfectly maintained apathetic masks. The clasp of a forearm, a kiss on the back of the hand revealing nothing but implying everything to those eager to see and be seen. Waiting in the wings for his entrance, Kennett scowled at an older woman sporting bare shoulders, a fashion faux pas for at least the last decade, her cranberry lipstick no better suited to the tides of public opinion. Azure Lord Salome emerged from the lounge, desperately trying to unrumple his shirt. Moments later, a redhead dressed in serving clothes appeared in the corner. Kennett snapped his white jade fan in front of his smirk, filing away that tidbit for later use should he ever need something from Lord Salome.

Across the room, untitled Alabaster musicians played. Not immune to the demands of appearance, they dressed in the traditional red and gold of the noble House Soga. They might lack the weftweaving enchantments in the garments of the nobility, but the sounds their instruments made commanded the motions of every Ruby Lord, Azure Lady and nouveau-riche Alabaster Merchant in the room.

“The Silver Lady, Irene Cashell!” called a guardswoman, and a trio of trumpets blared to life. Kennett’s mother glided across the balcony to where it met the white marble stairs leading

into the candlelight-speckled ballroom. Her ice-white gown radiated cold, enchanted to hold the frost no matter the climate.

“Good people of Mizurei. It is my honor and privilege to greet you, and to take the reins of leadership from the distinguished Soga clan. Rest assured, the Cashell clan will restore Mizurei and its port to glory and fulfill our role as a trade port for all the Empire!”

The people cheered her speech, though from his hiding spot Kennett saw many of the locals exchange quick glances. A few even shook their heads.

The uprising in Mizurei ruined the pier and halted trade. The eldest daughter of the Soga Clan died fighting the blaze. The Cashells obeyed Her Majesty the Empress's commands and moved to this swill of nowhere, taking charge of the port town in her name. It came as no surprise to Kennett that not everyone thrilled at their arrival.

Irene's delicate steps wafted her down into the fray, where each and every person revered, dipping their heads and bending at the knees to show respect to their new leader.

Kennett tracked every hemline, each bent knee and sour expression. Behind his ever-fashionable white jade fan, he scoffed at the woman who'd shown her head and the sole of her foot during the reverence. On the mainland, that sort of disrespect would be met with imprisonment. So long as none of the locals could see the judgment hiding behind his eyes, it did not matter if they were there. Or so he reasoned, peering around the heavy black curtain that afforded him privacy until his debut.

If you can see them, they can see you.

Ector's voice echoed in Kennett's mind. Kennett's etiquette instructor raised him on that simple truth—a noble will always have someone's attention, whether they know it or not. Kennett needed it.

Lip curling, a hiss pressed past Kennett's lips. Born and raised in the Capitol, he found it impossible to take the people of this backwater port town seriously. Sycophants and failures to the last, all kissing up to the higher tiers for their favor.

"Azure Lord Kennett Cashell, youngest son of the noble House of Cashell!" The guardswoman called. Again, the trumpets played.

He snapped the fan shut in frustration. Slowly, he forced an even breath between his lips.

In.

Out.

Kennett swanned across the balcony and descended the staircase, his emerald robes flowing like water behind him. The merchants, peasants, lords, and ladies stared. With a smirk Kennett twirled his hand to activate the enchantment. A spray of fine mist erupted from the hem of the robes, leaving a fleeting rainbow dancing in the candlelight behind him. His spectators gasped. Kennett considered paying them no heed; it was what he would have done back home, after all.

But halfway down the stairs, a pair of dull green eyes locked onto his. An older woman, absolutely fixated on Kennett, dressed in red dyed wool and leather boots with ugly, chunky heels maneuvered herself into his path. A simple bow and a "how do you do" later, he found himself trapped in a banal conversation with merchant so-and-so about the state of the local flocks of sheep and the prices of wool.

“I tell you; business has never been better! Sheep’s wool is at an all-time high, what with the trade interruptions my household maintains a near-monopoly. Now if only the sheep were healthier; I spend half my day fighting botfly infections, Your Lordship, and I don’t mind telling you-”

Stuck on just how unfashionably this newly rich woman had managed to dress herself, it took Kennett a moment to notice when the conversation changed.

“You’ll pardon me, madam. But I believe this young man promised me a dance, and I’m afraid I’ve come to collect.”

The voice was high and melodious, blending instantly with the tune the violins sang. Kennett turned to see a clean-faced young man offering an arm draped in blue and gold leather. His skin a rich dark brown, he wore his red-black hair in many tight braids. His deep brown eyes seemed to gaze down on Kennett, despite standing no higher than Kennett’s shoulder.

Kennett had certainly not promised this man a dance. He’d been careful not to promise anyone anything. Still, he knew a lifeline when he saw one, and seized it.

Kennett began “Ah yes. My apologies Madam...” What was the Alabaster sheep merchant’s name on this island? Well, the pause was too long now, might as well just keep going like he meant the sentence to end there. “I must make good on my promise. Meanwhile, I’d advise you to consult a tailor. Preferably one born in this century. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

The woman’s jaw dropped. She took a breath to defend her outfit, but Kennett turned to face his savior. He was surprised by the bright white smile and steady eyes that met him. Even more surprised when the stranger took his hand and led him back into the crowd. The stranger’s grasp was stronger than his size would’ve indicated, and the hand was rough with callouses unbecoming any man, let alone a noble.

“Thank you,” Kennett muttered to the young man. He took his hand back and looked his rescuer up and down. No doubt a skinshaper had enchanted that leather, as it sparkled like sea-foam in moonlight. So gentle was the twinkle, it took Kennett several seconds to spot the boy’s tiger eye and sapphire cufflinks. No question he didn’t belong here, wearing garb of no house color and with no matron to scold him for asking another boy to dance. A dignitary from one of the islands further West, perhaps?

“You’re welcome. If you’re willing to actually grant me that dance, I’d even call it ‘my pleasure.’” Then he laughed and offered Kennett his hand again.

Before Kennet could respond, he heard a voice from behind call his name and turned to face the speaker.

The woman before him shone like the Empress herself. Tall and lithe, her straight black hair done up in a tight bun. The hair pins that held it in place were pure red jade, tips glowing with tiny blue-hot flames, and the two simple locks of hair that fell artfully around her soft face accentuating her rouged cheeks. The shape of her dress highly traditional, sewn tightly across her chest and shifting to a flowing auburn skirt at the bottom. There, at the base of her skirt a ring of living flame bobbed up and down gently.

“I am Ruby Lady Amaya of House Soga. Are you Kennett Cashell?” Her eyelashes fluttered briefly, and a red fan snapped open in front of her tossing brilliant sparks into the air. Clearly, a fire weftweaver crafted this masterpiece.

Kennett forced his jaw closed. Amaya surpassed the basics of fashion and society. Her black eyes glittered like snowfall through a night window. The fold at the edge the same as the Empress, marking a lineage of nobility. Her look was timeless.

“But of course. I am newly arrived to town, youngest scion of House Cashell.” Kennett assumed the reverence pose as expected when addressing a superior. Right leg bent at the knee, left straightened out in front, Kennett reflexively kept his torso straight and foot on the ground, as one ought in polite company.

“Charmed to meet you, Kennett of House Cashell.” Her hands were delicate and soft, the hands of a woman who would one day be head of her household. Her lips were much the same, as Kennett found out when she planted a tender kiss upon his knuckles. “I would be honored if you would dance with me.” She hadn't let his hand part from hers.

Kennett's pulse quickened. Who wouldn't want to dance with this noble icon of beauty? Kennett's robe settled around him, thankfully concealing the wobble in his knees. He would have to get hold of himself if he was to perform the gavotte the orchestra had just begun in the background. Still, he opened his mouth to agree to her most flattering request--

“I'm terribly sorry, Lady Soga.” The stranger interrupted again. His voice was still high, but something sounded of steel inside it. This man seemed unaccustomed to ceding to a woman. More evidence he hailed from somewhere outside the Empire. “But dear Lord Cashell has promised me the next dance, and I intend to collect. As we both know, the Cashells never break their word.”

“My word is my bond. So it is to the Empress, to the Empire, and to the people.” Lady Soga recited the Cashell family motto, then inclined her head gracefully. “Pleasantly for you, that includes nobodies in gaudy leather. I will be here when Lord Cashell tires of your pomp.” Amaya flashed her dazzling smile and turned away.

“Farewell, Lady. I look forward to seeing you again.” The man whisked Kennett onto the dance floor.

In the Empire there is a moment of awkwardness when two men are beginning a dance. It is unclear who is meant to lead—which family carries more bearing, and how far down the line of succession each son is within his family. Far easier is the role afforded to those who choose to dance with women, as the woman assumes the lead and the man is expected to enjoy the follow.

But the stranger didn't hesitate. Instead, he swept Kennett beneath his arms, hands pressing his dancing partner into the follow position.

Oh, what a dancer! This man, whoever he was, pulled Kennett close and pushed him out far, spun him slowly and leapt lightly all in perfect time to the drums and pipe whistling throughout the ballroom. Every time Kennett returned from a spin, each time he came back from a corner, the stranger's eyes were fixed on his, a small smile gracing his angular handsome face.

Room still spinning, half out of breath and unwilling to let go of the stranger's hand, Kennett revered. His pulse raced, lips dry, head foggy with the delight of the dance.

The stranger took his arm to lift him up, then slowly raised Kennett's hand to his lips--

And twisted the hand, placing a rough, warm kiss on the inside of Kennett's wrist.

Kennett's entire body shuddered. There was something in the chapped lips, the weather-worn hands of the man who had danced with him, the lithe form and strong but small frame that was both so unique and so appealing. His eyes flickered closed, and a tiny breath slipped past his lips. Who was his dance partner, and how could he make sure to see him again? Swaying to the beat of the new, slower song, Kennett's eyes drifted open.

The man was gone.

Instead, Amaya perched smilingly before him, offering an obliging hand. "Perhaps now I could interest you in our tete-a-tete, Lord Cashell?"

Eyes scouring the crowd for the man who had made him shudder with a single kiss, Kennett nodded idly to the ranking woman before him and gave a reverence. She took him in her arms and swung him gracefully about the floor.

The two dances were as different as storm and sun. Where the stranger had been wild, passionate and overwhelming, Amaya was gentle, courteous and artful. For every swing that had made Kennett's heart pound in his chest, Amaya flittered past, the ideal vision of beauty and grace. Her red dress wove circles of enticing flame as they danced. Her steps swift, light, and artful. She was, to understate it, perfection. Certain and direct, easy to follow and demonstrating skill most performers would envy. She even gave Kennett time to shine, letting his robes fly out in a joyous twirl, mist scattering a rainbow behind him for as long as the song would allow. By the time the song had ended, Kennett found himself laughing and clutching Amaya's arm.

Amaya, too, took his hand at the end of the dance. But she did not kiss it. Indeed, she kept him in the reverence for three full beats. Kennett got the impression she wanted to see and be seen to have danced with him just as much as she had enjoyed the dance.

Then she drew him up. With a single fluid motion, he was pressed against her, chest to chest and cheek to cheek.

"You're a delightful dancer." she whispered, her breath hot in Kennett's ear. "And a man of obvious taste. Will you do me the honor of accepting my affections, that I might call on you again before the next ball?"

Blood rushed to Kennett's cheek. The fire crackled softly around him. He opened his mouth to reply but could only stammer out a series of noises. Amaya put her finger on his lips—her skin so warm and soft—smirked and said, “A nod or shake will quite suffice, Lord Cashell.”

Stunned, Kennett nodded.

Amaya whirled away and plucked the pins from her hair, letting it tumble out of its neat bun and cascade gracefully down her back.

“My my, been a busy bee, haven't we?” a voice familiar rasped behind him.

Kennett jumped. His hand clasped on his heart. Pulse racing for an entirely different reason now, he turned to see who had caught him in his deliberations.

There, in all her splendor, stood his great aunt Ynid. Her finery worn and old fashioned, befitting a dowager of her age. The green gown blossomed to blooming roses trailing faintly on the floor, and her weathered face was lined in dignified wrinkles. Her hair she wore in faded red wisps, draped carelessly around her keen green eyes. Those eyes were now focused on her nephew in a piercing manner Kennett knew all too well.

“Nothing to be so excited about, Auntie. Just a dance or two with some of the local folk.”

“With the daughter of the Sogas, you mean!” Ynid laughed as she pointed a crooked finger at him. “And a handsome young man who doesn't seem quite fit in this company despite his fine clothes, eh?”

“No proposals were made.”

"I wouldn't expect them to be, not from the likes of either of them. Well done pitting them against one another. That Soga girl has been watching you like a hawk all night, but she didn't bother to talk until you let someone else past your air of pride and superiority, eh?"

"Auntie!" Kennett replied, with feigned shock "Are you implying that I didn't want to dance with every stranger and half-cousin in the ballroom?"

"Far be it from me to imply such a slight! Indeed, I think you played a masterful gambit. New in town, stand-offish and the youngest of a noble house? Half the eligible in town will know your name by the end of the night, and the other half will be dying to know who you are and why you're suddenly here—as well as why Lady Soga sought your favor so brazenly. Honestly, I've never seen someone hearken to my teachings quite as thoroughly or as naturally as you, dear nephew."

As Ynid finished talking, she cackled and gestured for another glass of wine, her enormous gold rings clacking together. A servant scrambled to oblige.

Kennett looked down in mock humility. "An excellent teacher requires an excellent student. I only aspire to be as you would have me be, and to fulfill the roles expected from one of my station." He could not prevent the smirk from pressing across his lips any more than he could hide it from his clever aunt.

"Be that as it may. I've a few young ladies myself that I've promised to soiree and dazzle tonight. I may be a Cashell only by marriage, but I outrank each of them in wisdom and power—"

"And age." Kennett quipped.

Ynid clasped an adorned hand to her heart, the other filled with a fresh glass of wine. "You would dare comment on a woman's age? Perilous choice, young one." Then, ruffling

Kennett's hair, she whispered in his ear "You'll manage. Just be careful how much you're seen with nobodies like that sailor, yes? It would not do to complicate your station further." Then she spun away, laughter and chicanery flashing in her face, downing the glass of alcohol in one motion, the scent of fresh roses trailing behind her.

Kennett sighed but held a smile fixed like glass. He hadn't wanted to think on the complications of his station. Not tonight, and certainly not in regards to the boy he had danced with. Or with Amaya. It was traditional for a man to endeavor to marry up, of course, but it rarely happened. More often an influential son in higher standing would be wed to a young woman of poise and polish but lesser standing. He would take her name, her titles, join her family. Someday she would rule their joint household just as the Empress ruled the Empire. A man could only hope that the woman who deigned to take him on as her husband was as generous and wise as the woman who had led all of cultured reality for seven hundred years.

When two men wed, or two women—or any unusual pairing, for that matter—the details of status and position became much more complicated. Does the pair lead the house jointly, or divide the leadership by issue, and how would reproduction happen? It is of course critical to provide heirs to the family. Preferably heirs with their own magic gifts brought on by the marriage of their parents.

Kennett flinched at this thought, then forced his eyes to go dead.

Not here.

There was one other thing his aunt mentioned. She'd said the stranger was a sailor.

Kennett ran his fingers over his palm, tracing the memory of the calluses, feeling the muscles that swung him neatly from one step to the next.

It would make sense.

So he made a circuit of the ballroom, bid his goodbyes to the other ranking nobles. He made a great show of saying goodnight to the Soga family in particular, bowing and flattering the eldest of the women present. Not the clan matriarch, not for something as informal and impromptu as this gathering. Sakura Soga, Amaya's aunt, grabbed him by the shoulder before he could walk away.

"I saw you dancing with our Amaya."

"It was a pleasure being greeted by her good graces. I hope I might be welcomed to spend time with her in future," Kennett replied.

"Perhaps. I will speak with the head of our house on the matter. Be certain you are on your best behavior young man. I will not have Amaya tarry with hooligans or rascallions, and your family has a reputation for producing both. Know that all eyes are on you." She eyed his red hair, a snarl not quite hidden on her face.

"Your kindness has been noted." A chill crisped Kennett's voice. Sakura relinquished him. With the last of his goodbyes done, Kennett excused himself and left the party.

And headed to the docks to look for a mysterious, wealthy sailor who had conned his way into an elite party.

Chapter Two

View from the Pier

The night air tasted crisp and bitter as the smell of the sea washed over Kennett. A frigid autumn wind howled off the water, leaving Kennett grateful for his long robes.

Mizurei greeted him with its usual indifference. Candlelight flickered dimly in several windows, the cracked ancient lamps dark and lifeless on the lines of the street. The street Kennett strolled varied from a smooth, shiny material spattered with cracks no one knew how to repair to cobblestones for newer roads. En route to the pitch-black docks, Kennett could only imagine what this town looked like before the Cataclysm. He pictured the lights shining and rippling off the water, giving the town its name—the Ghost of the Sea.

Nowadays the only title the town had was Misery. Not that anyone dared speak that to the locals, of course. They might be drab and lifeless but insulting them was a good way to fan the flames of rebellion.

Besides, Kennett's heart propelled him twirling and giggling down the road. First, he dreamed of dancing with the handsome stranger, feeling rough hands on his pristine skin, laughing and spinning in the moonlight. He dreamed of running away from the Empire, of freedom from the duties of his rank and vanishing from his mother's scathing gaze.

The song in his mind ended, and Kennett's heart spun to Amaya. Her glittering black eyes watched him make petite steps, straight spined and perfectly executed. His imagination ran away with him, picturing the perfect, traditional wedding in his bright red robes to the perfect, traditional woman bedecked in his familial green. Free to make his own choices, away from the displeasure Irene heaped on him, finally a success.

Whispers followed Kennett as he swanned down the road, the few stray wanderers of the evening pointing and commenting at his passage. It wasn't surprising, really. The Cashells had only been appointed this fiefdom by The Empress that summer after the riots and had only arrived a fortnight ago. Embarrassed, Kennett stopped dancing and whipped out his fan, masking his face and ready to defend himself should any of the rioters think the young lord a tempting target.

Kennett traipsed down the stone stairs to the sturdy wooden dock. Three spokes of pier stretched out before him. At the far end of the center fork floated a great galleon crafted by a stoneshaper to float as such materials never should. That would be part of the Imperial Fleet, of course. Likely the guards that the Empress had sent along with them to secure her hold on the region. Those ships were armed to the teeth and just about impossible to sink.

The left fork became hastily rebuilt pier bobbed in the tide. There was still flotsam and jetsam clinging to the area where not two months ago the people had rioted and scorched the Soga fleet into the sea. The sea shone in the feeble moonlight, the crests of the tiny waves shimmering white. Peppered across them were spots of black, bits of ash that had not yet sunk to the bottom of the sea.

Wincing, Kennett began to understand the extent of the damage. This pier was once the envy of all the Empire, large enough for hundreds of crafts to dock. The common folk must have been truly furious to wreak such havoc. *But why?* They were citizens of the Empire, the only safe place in all the world. Their freedoms were guaranteed, their food cheap and plentiful. Certainly they were expected to deliver obeisance to their liege-lords, but that was just the way of things. Those with the magic and the right to rule held their stations, and the rest paid them allegiance.

Kennett knew he was looking for a sailor, but how to find the boy? Great war triremes, wee sailing ships and everything in between still docked at the reconstructed port. The sailor could be on any of them. And even if he did find him, what then? Kennett held no sway over the might of the ocean, and had no appeal in sailing off into the sunset. A hundred thousand romance novels might promise that to be a happy ending, but Kennett found it much more likely to end with him puking his guts out and his would-be betrothed being disgusted at his weakness. Or being eaten by water spirits. Either way, not a lovely outcome.

Stuck in his own thoughts at the far end of the dock, it was only his name that drew him from his reverie.

“Kennett Cashell. I have to say I'm surprised to see you here.” The sound was melodious and soft, a lilting alto measuring in time to the waves.

Kennett whirled on the spot, mouth open with a ready excuse for why he was here, so far from his house and the party he was ostensibly hosting.

His sailor stood, poised in the enchanted leather. A weftweaver must have enchanted the garment, though where a sailor had gotten the coin for it was anyone's guess.

A bright white smile spread across his face, and his arm reached out to Kennett. Away from the bustle of the ballroom, it became obvious just how short the sailor must be; Kennett's eyes looked over the tip of his hair. A quick glance showed that his quarry donned boots with a slight heel.

“I thought you might be found here.” Kennett beamed.

“What gave you that idea?” Smirking, the stranger pressed his elbow into the wooden post holding down the pier, chin resting in his hand.

"My family are sailors by blood. You have the same callouses as my brothers, and the same muscles as my mom." Kennett's mouth formed the reply but his eyes glued themselves to the hips of the stranger, pronounced by his casual pose.

He laughed, a shining silvery sound. "Well, you're certainly right. I am a sailor, among a long list of other things. And what about you, Kennett Cashell. What are you?" With a single step the distance between them was closed, and the sailor's hand brushed Kennett's wrist.

Kennett blushed furiously. He forced his breathing to be slow and even, then met the eyes of the mystery that he had chased on little more than a theory and the quip of an old woman.

"I am a boy asking you for your name, so I know how to call on you in future."

The boy seemed to consider Kennett. He wasn't so much older than Kennett, his eyes unwrinkled and his face smooth as one who has only begun to shave. "I suppose you've earned that much. I'm Singer of Sapphire Skies. My friends call me Sky."

Kennett's heart skipped a few beats. *A name.* He bade it be silent. "Well met, then, Singer of Sapphire Skies. I am Lord Kennett of clan Cashell. We are now properly introduced." Kennett extended a hand to Sky.

Sky clasped it tightly, his callouses pressing into Kennett's flesh. Then he laughed, that musical sound of mirth pouring from his lips again. "Let's dispense with the formality, alright Nettie?"

"I'm afraid I do not have that option, Singer of Sapphire Skies. We meet in unusual circumstances, true, but as we do not know one another personally I must insist."

“A stick in the mud already, Nettie? Well, no worries. I'm capable of playing by your rules until and unless you tell me otherwise.” Something flashed across his dark brown eyes, but then Sky leaned in and placed a hand on Kennett's shoulder, his breath hot in Kennett's ear. “Which I expect will happen quite soon, my lord.” Kennett's knees buckled, odd look forgotten.

Decorum remained critical, however. One never knew how many eyes were on their back, and with the recent rebellion matters were too tense to put to the test over a fleeting attraction to a stranger.

Kennett forced a step backwards. “I appreciate your direct nature. You understand why I cannot reciprocate.”

“Yes, I suppose. Still stuck up in the Empire, huh? Tell me, are you Ruby, because you're a son of a Silver Lady? Or Azure, because you're the youngest and unwed?”

“You seem very well-informed, Singer of Sapphire Skies. What tier do you occupy in the Empire?”

“Whatever tier I damned well please.” Sky laughed, lithe muscles rippling as he snapped open a white jade fan. It took Kennett two breaths to realize Sky had snatched the fan from his hands. “I prefer freedom to any individual rank or station.”

Kennett brushed his fingertips together, unaccustomed to being without his social defense. “You are either luxurious or a beggar, then. To disregard the nature of station so simply. Which is it, sailor?”

“Ah ah. I asked first. Azure or Ruby? Or do you prefer not to answer?” Sky stood straight, fanning himself idly with Kennett's fan.

“I suppose that is between myself and the Empire, no?” Kennett quipped. He reached out and grabbed the fan from Sky’s unresisting hands.

“Then an unanswered question can only be met by another.” Sky shrugged.

Kennett stopped cold. This wasn't how this was supposed to go. None of this was how matters were meant to go. A higher tier had just queried a lower tier, who was commanded by the laws of the Empire to answer truthfully and completely as soon as possible. Sky wasn't playing by those rules.

“You're not used to being told no, I gather?” Sky smirked. “Well, become accustomed to it, my lord. You'll find that this town isn't like anywhere you're used to. People have hearts and minds of their own this far west. I only hope you figure it out before it's too late. Go home, pretty liege-lord. You don't belong here, and your mommy is going to get you in trouble for being out too late.”

His face unreadable, Sky turned and walked away, further down the pier.

“W-wait!” Kennett called after him. “If I want to see you again, how do I--?”

“I'm often on the docks. Come by some time and ask the sea about me.” With that Sky tumbled off the dock and into the ocean.

Kennett screamed and ran after him.

In total silence, Kennett stood and watched the waves. Sky didn't splash, didn't seem to make any effort to come back to the air.

From behind came the sounds of the guards, confusedly murmuring at the youngest Cashell out alone after dark. Some went to the scorched end of the dock and fished around in the ash.

The lead guardswoman approached Kennett "What happened, My Lord?"

"I...I thought...I saw..." Forcing a breath, Kennett shook his head. "Nothing. My apologies, Linnea. I will return to my estate, and trouble you no further this eve."

The guardswoman nodded, and a quintet fell in around Kennett. Slowly they walked him home, their eyes alert for any threats that might emerge in the night.

Kennett's mind was elsewhere. Sky vanishing into the water, his obvious disdain for the Empire. His gentle touches, the way his smile had lit a room and his laugh the whole of the night.

He couldn't be a human.

Which made him a spirit. A monster, probably ancient, responsible for the Cataclysm.

An enemy of the Empire.

"There we are, my lord. May your evening be restful." Linnea signaled for her followers to retreat. At least he wouldn't have to listen to the guard explain where they'd found him, that should save him some face.

As if on cue, he heard his mother's voice calling from two rooms over. "Kennett. Come."

Face to the floor, Kennett sludged his way into the receiving room.

There sat his mother in all her splendor. Irene Cashell, seated tautly in a chair of fine oak. She still wore her party finery, diamonds and jade adorning her neck and ears, her red hair locked into the careful bun it had been tucked into at the beginning of the evening. Her green eyes and freckled face might promise mirth or admiration to a stranger unaware of the sharpness of her tongue and the uncanny ability of her nose to scent an opportunity to seize upon. Even her dress was sharp, coated in crystalline shards of unmelting ice.

Kennett revered low.

“So. I am told many most interesting things about your evening, youngest son of mine. Illuminate me.” Even seated, Irene towered over Kennett. She was six feet, most of it torso. Broad-shouldered and pointed chin scowling down at her son.

“There are many interesting things I can share with you, mother. Shall we discuss the price of sheep and wool? Perhaps the antics of young Azure Lady Vaughan, or the redhead that rumbled Azure Lord Salome's shirt so thoroughly that he was seen adjusting it inside the ballroom?”

“Enough.” The iron in Irene's tone ended Kennett's diversion.

“Very well, mother. What is it you wished to discuss?”

“Firstly, tell me of your dance with Amaya Soga.”

At this, Kennett beamed. His heart felt warm. “A beautiful young woman, trained in proper steps and fully able to lead me wherever she wished. She honored me with a dance, and asked if she might call upon me another time to demonstrate her affections.” He could not help seeing her skin shimmering behind the red dress, her dark eyes framed by blazing hair ornaments looking delicately at him with each step, nor the way his heart felt in his hands as

she'd spun him away to show his own beauty and grace to any who might be watching. Even the moment when she had not deigned to help him up but left him reverencing her stirred something in him. If she had only kissed him, rather than embraced him—but perhaps he might win that honor.

“I see. And the conversation you had with her Aunt Sakura?”

“Was expectably unpleasant. She had concerns about the history of our family, and about my potential reputation. However, she did mention that she would speak with Naviya.”

“Good. Now speak to me of the peasant you danced with before Amaya.”

Sky laughing. Sky plunging into the water. Sky kissing the inside of Kennett's wrist, which still burned from the contact.

“I am afraid I do not know much about him, mother. He was polite enough to ask after a dance when I was cornered in dull conversation.”

He disappeared under the water and didn't resurface.

“I believe he may be a sailor, given how he moved and a comment Ynid made.”

He was wearing clothing that no normal sailor could afford.

“I'm afraid he departed quite suddenly, and then I was rather taken with Amaya to pay him much heed.”

And I chased him out to the pier.

“Hmm.” Irene scoffed. “You took your leave early this evening. Why? Where did you go?”

Kennett's breath caught.

Of course she noticed.

He called on 19 year's experience lying to his mother and spun a story. "I departed after my dance with Amaya, such that she might be the comment of the evening as to who I danced with. I ensured to make my rounds and give a peaceable good eve to those who were amenable. I then took a stroll out towards the pier, to better survey the damage the revolutionaries caused with my own eyes."

"That was foolish, son. We do not know how many rebels are still around, or if they are pacified with the disasters they have already wrought. If you are to go out again, I command you take some members of the house guard with you. I've no time for the political ramifications of my son slain by rebels when we were sent to restore order." The ice at the hem of her dress rustled a tiny, threatening tune as it collided with itself.

Leave it to Irene Cashell to bluntly ruin a mood.

"Of course. I understand, mother." Kennett's lungs felt tight. It was one thing to know logically that your mother only cared about you for the sake of her reputation. It was quite another to have her say it to your face. "May I take my leave? The evening has been long and filled with much discussion, a fair amount of it inane and irrelevant. I would enjoy some solitude before bed."

Irene's eyes were ice as she beheld her youngest child. "Kennett. There is potential within you yet, my son. Do not squander it on pithy comments and chasing fashion. You may not have Manifested, but neither had your grandfather at this age. He proved to be quite competent after a bit of training. He even got into proper magic before he passed. You shall as well. Have faith. Work hard. You will be rewarded."

Kennett rolled his eyes, stopping his lips from forming Irene's favorite speech as she deployed it for the thousandth time. It was true, he hadn't Manifested yet. Irene, of course, had shown her first signs of magic at the tender age of three, calling the waves closer and closer until they soaked her dress. His father, Daithi, had Manifested at eight, beckoning the breezes to send his kite soaring above the highest rooftops without running so much as ten paces. Even his brothers, Fionn and Tobias, had both proven their magic by the time they were his age, masters of the sea and sky. The Cashell legacy of seaworthiness continued, and the legends of battling great monsters from the depths rose every generation. A legacy that Kennett was increasingly convinced would never include him. He brushed a long, runaway strand of red hair out of his eyes, and bowed his obeisance to his mother.

He said nothing.

Irene left her son bowing until his muscles ached.

Finally, she spoke.

"You are dismissed. Do something useful with the rest of the evening."

Without looking up, Kennett scrambled away.

The spiral stairs up to his chambers creaked and groaned at his progress. It had been an archer's tower once, he was told, and before that an aviary. Now the dusty remnants housed the least-impressive lord of the most-impressive family in the entire Empire.

In the musty air, Kennett pulled his glowstone from the cupboard. Its warm orange-yellow light illuminated the barren room.

It yawned its emptiness to him, as if greeting him with his own feelings. On one end, a grand four-poster bed lay moth eaten. On another, a pair of dressers and an armoire,

second-hand but lovingly cared for, one could barely see the scratches now. In the middle of the room sat a simple worktable and chair, small enough that Kennett's footsteps still echoed on the cold stone beneath his feet.

To the spirits with her. I do plenty of useful things.

Rage fuelled Kennett, and he gathered fabric, scissors, needle and thread from his armoire. Tools assembled, Kennett snipped and clipped, ripped and tore. The shreds before him flew apart to the tiniest of fragments. Then, with blade and string, he rejoined them. This tatter *here*, that fragment *there*. The act of creation and destruction doubled over itself, the table quickly covered in an unrecognizable splash of color and more than a few drops of Kennett's own blood. He worked hard that night, an image dancing in his mind that he could not chase away.

When he withdrew from his reverie, Kennett's brow was covered in sweat. The oil lamp had snuffed itself. Fingertips covered in makeshift bandages, Kennett held the fruit of his labors. In the dim, it did not shine as it ought. Fumbling and cursing, he lit a pair of candles.

The gown sparkled in the dim. A white jade collar shone over a low-cut neckline, gathering in simple folds of shimmering black to a fine waist held with a white leather clasp. Below was a skirt turning like the sea, shadow and emerald, teal and turquoise, azure and foam twirled together to a single sweeping figure. Kennett spun the dress in his arms, and the skirt rose to flare out, a ripple of living water in cloth topped with the wink of gems and darkness.

Kennett sat for a long time admiring his work, thinking of the girl whose eyes matched the shine of the blouse and the boy who vanished into the murky depths of the skirt.

Chapter Three

Kennett dashed down the stairs still in his sleepwear, emerald nightgown whirling around his ankles.

“Late again? I see the move hasn't done anything for your punctuality.” Daithi quipped at his son.

Once upon a time, this man had been beautiful. His dusty hair had flowed down his soft, boyish face. Lean sailor muscle sat behind billowing clothes.

“What can I say, I was kept up late by the stirrings of brilliant conversation and endless possibilities that have already unveiled themselves to me since we arrived in Misery.”

Daithi chortled into his tea. Now, pouch sat on Kennett's father's gut, his hair cropped short to hide the bald patch, his clothing unadorned. Kennett wondered sometimes whether his father hated all the pomp and circumstance of his position, or if he'd simply grown tired of it.

“One of these days your clever tongue will get you into trouble, son. Let us pray to the Empress that it is not today.” Daithi smiled, wagging one finger in the air in a mock-scold.

Kennett plonked himself into a chair across from his father. He rubbed his eyes, trying to clear the sleep from them. He wasn't sure how late he'd been up working on the gown last night. He downed his first mug of tea in one long drink and poured himself a fresh cup filled with sugar and lemon. “And what is it to be today? A long tea with Ynid, or a stroll along the dockside pretending to care about the latest shipping woes of the fishmongers?”

“Neither. You will be having tea with Amaya Soga at the Soga residence this afternoon.”

Kennett choked, then slowed his pace so as not to get crumbs trapped in the long red strands of his hair. "I'm surprised mother did not tell me last night."

"Final details arrived this morning. What kept you up so late, anyway?" Daithi waved and a young serving girl refilled the teapot.

"I was making a gift for Amaya Soga. To match the beauty of the sea of Mizurei."

Daithi nodded. "Very well. Ken, We are new here. The rumors that used to circulate on the mainland cannot become commonplace."

"I know, dad. I won't make trouble." *And hopefully I'll ditch this dreary nowhere of a town.*

"I love and believe in you. Now would you like a puff pastry?" Daithi offered a roll.

Kennett took a pastry and bit into it, the flaky, buttered crust resting on his tongue and mingling with the fine raspberry filling. His fingers trailed across the carvings around the edge of the wood table while he sipped his tea, breathing deep and preparing for the day ahead.

"Father, I don't see how the Soga can call themselves a noble family. Look at these numbers!" Tobias, Kennett's middle brother, complained on his way down the stairs. "They go from bad to worse over just the course of the last five years. Either Naviya is more incompetent than I feared, or her family's swindling the Empire hand over fist!"

Tobias was always looking at numbers, fiddling with how many barrels one could fit in the hold of a ship, how many knots one would need to average to reach a destination in time. It was only a matter of time until he gained full control of the family's finances—or got married off to do it for some blushing bride.

Daithi greeted his middle son with a frown. "Tobias, the Soga have suffered enough losses. Or have you forgotten the death of their heir? Besides, the task was not set to you. Get back to your poetry class, or you will fail to woo a wife befitting your otherwise brilliant mind."

Tobias scowled, scooping a goblet of fresh apple cider to his lips and back to the table. "I have no interest in poetry, father. You really should see--"

"Enough." Daithi smiled as he said it, but his tone made it clear he would brook no argument. Tobias trotted back to his lessons.

Kennett finished his breakfast and excused himself. He packed the dress into fine cloth wrapping and considered his wardrobe.

Moments later Kennett and the wrapped gift swirled hastily down the stairs towards the carriage. His doublet bore the house symbol, a green ship against white seafoam, stitched upon the back. His trousers flowed in clean white ripples beneath him. Much more in the tradition of mainland fashion than of Mizurei, Kennett's clothes lacked the long sleeves and flowing robe the nobles here sported.

The coachmen scowled at him and clicked his fingertips against a timepiece. Late, but fashionable, Kennett swooped into the carriage.

Mizurei blurred past him.

The buildings of Mizurei wore the dichotomy of the ancient city. Half of them new, made of simple wood or stone laid out in squares or rectangles. Others from before the Cataclysm; A half-circle wall encrusted with gemstones no one could seem to remove—but they'd managed to rip off the roof in the attempt. A hearth made from what had clearly once been a living tree. Now

the sap ran dry, and the branches bare so that the wind off the sea shrieked and beckoned to anyone foolish enough to approach.

Against this pall of houses, the people of Mizurei dredged back and forth. On each street people hurried past. No one lingered, no one stood in the crossroads talking. But it wasn't until they'd turned onto the finer street that included the Soga residence that Kennett put together what felt the strangest about the streets of Mizurei.

There are no children in the streets.

The riots must have terrified the people, that no children were out running errands, playing games, escaping the doldrums of the standard education system.

Then the carriage turned to the Soga home, and Kennett forgot his deliberations. The home stood out for three reasons. The enormous wood building radiated warmth from a Woodworker's enchantment and dwarfed nearby dwellings. Further, every inch of it was clean. No dirt, must, grime or moss flourished anywhere on it. Lastly, there was the fountain.

In the heart of the courtyard stood a figure in radiant gold. *Literal* gold. Head and shoulders taller than her companions circling the fountain, The Empress's steady eyes watched over the people of Mizurei. At her feet water rippled outwards giving her the appearance of wafting over it, her feet barely brushing the surface. In her right hand a miniature blue flame shone, held above her head to light the world around her. In the left, a steady dripping of water crafted music from its impacts on the tiny shells perfectly arrayed beneath. And of course, the crown of shattered stones wove into and out of her hair, each stone turning over and over, refracting the autumn sun.

Kennett paused to give a deep bow. "In Her name" he murmured, then turned to look at the rest of the display.

Four statues surrounded the centerpiece. Each of the four elements in their traditional interpretation. To the east sat fire, laughing and drinking from her goblet. Drops of water trickled down her lips and face, falling into the central fountain, looking like tears of laughter from her joy. To the north floated wind, eyes closed, face frozen in a serene half-smile, arms splayed to take flight. To the south Earth stood inexorable against the water, unfazed and unstoppable. Water lounged west opposite fire. His hair was long and wild, mischief and adventure in the smirk that graced his sand-blasted face.

Kennett wound his way into the Soga family house. Inside, the middle-aged man who passed for a head servant in these parts steered Kennett into the foyer.

“You will forgive us; the tea is still steeping. Her ladyship will be delighted to greet you shortly.” The servant stated and sharply closed the door.

Kennett sat, taking in the finery of the Soga clan. Much of it was red and gold, as befitted a family known for their fire magics and long history of stature and status. Glancing across the room, the chaise and carpet faded into the feeling of the room. A double bookcase of dark, heavy wood stood out among the plush furniture. A layer of glass stopped guests from opening the books; ancient tomes bound in leather and dust. The thought alone was nearly enough to get Kennett sneezing.

“Beautiful, aren't they?” Kennett forced a breath before turning around. *Do not betray your surprise.*

Amaya Soga stood in an exquisite gown of scarlet and emerald. From her arms hung long, looping sleeves speckled with shimmering white sapphires, matching the gem that glittered around her exposed neck. The short skirt twirled like flame as she approached him, the

long, dark leggings making certain no skin was exposed between the skirt and the ornate heels padding the carpet to close the distance between them.

“My only sadness is that we cannot enjoy them in a casual way. They are as old as my family, and unfortunately a bit fragile.”

Kennett reached for Amaya's hand to kiss it, but she closed the distance. Kennett blushed as she placed a tender kiss upon his cheek. His face burned.

“A-and how long have the years been?” Kennett stammered.

“Oh, the Sogas have ruled here for two thousand years.”

A pronounced silence followed.

“Yes, I know. We were here before The Cataclysm, and before the Empire. Mizurei used to be a hub for trade between spirits and humans, did you know? Now, of course, we are one of the first lines of defense should war begin anew. I suppose that is why The Empress sent your family to our aid; it would not do well to have one's flank exposed in the case of battle.”

“Is it strange, then, to have a Silver household come to lead the charge?”

Amaya wore a flat, practiced smile. “It does not matter what we desire, or what may or may not be strange. The Empress has commanded that a Silver house take command where a Ruby house has failed. Now the question is simply whether the Cashells have the ability to succeed in such a challenging climate.” Mischief played in Amaya's eyes. Then she opened her red fan in front of her face and gave a little titter. “That is such a grim topic to be focused upon! Let us move on to our tea, yes? My mother is all too excited to meet you, and I'm certain my aunt would like to have another round of words as well.” The twinkle in Amaya's eyes said she knew all too well what sort of words her aunt would have for Kennett.

It occurred to Kennett that Amaya might not only have known about her Aunt's intervention on the evening of the ball but have arranged it herself. Ector would be pleased that the idea had struck him, and equally frustrated that he had not prepared for the possibility.

Everyone has hidden motives. If you discover them without exposing them, you are the one in control.

As Kennett followed Amaya through the study, across a hallway and into the room where her mother and aunt were seated next to tea so fresh it was still steaming, he thought of what Ector would say.

Watch them. The body betrays the mind; the angle of a fan, the shape of a smile, the curve of a hip. These are the ways you will know someone.

Kennett reverenced low to the ground, eyes averted from the ranking women in front of him.

Naviya Soga's voice came high and delicate. "Kennett Cashell. A pleasure to have you in our home. Amaya and Sakura seem quite intrigued by your presence."

Looking up, Kennett's eyes met a woman of little stature. Her dark hair fell in gentle waves around her soft sienna-toned face. Her brown eyes pierced through Kennett. The dress she wore dazzled in cyan and scarlet, the color of her birth family and of the Soga clan. At her elbows the dress swooped down into two trailing sleeves; a Mizurei fashion timeless and elegant on Naviya's slim frame.

She bore herself as though she were no lesser person than the Empress.

"You do me the honor, Lady Soga, by inviting my lowly presence into your home."

The greeting was traditional for an Azure guest to a Ruby host. Kennett had practiced the phrase.

Despite what Kennett thought a lovely delivery, Sakura snorted in a matter most undignified. "Of course we do you the honor, young one. You who are so new in town and already meeting with the most eligible young woman on the whole of the island."

"Come now, sister. There is no need to be brash. Kennett's invitation comes from Amaya and myself, I am certain he will conduct himself with the decorum due such a circumstance, as he has thus far." Naviya spoke the entire reprimand with a gentle smile. "So Kennett, let us begin our tea. Do you take sugar?" She gestured to a servant. Without hesitation Kennett was led to a seat at the table. To his right sat Naviya, to his left Sakura. Across from him, perched in such delicacy that she could only have been raised to it, Amaya. The red plush of the chair sank under his weight, and the tea was poured into the customary small cups. Once set upon the table Naviya lifted her cup to give the customary toast.

"To the Empress, to the Empire that she rules, to those gathered here. May we live in honor and service to the Empress and Empire so long as it is willed. In Her name."

"In Her name." echoed Kennett and Amaya. Sakura sat silent.

"Now that the formalities have been attended to, let us bid you welcome. It is truly an honor to have the esteemed Cashell house come to us, and a demonstration of The Empress's wisdom to send her resources to us in such a dire hour."

Naviya's standard face seemed to be a smile. Kennett knew of her reputation only. A courteous and friendly face, behind which sat one of the sharpest minds in the Empire. It was due in large part to Naviya's interference that the uprising had been stopped in its tracks. Had she not deployed her house forces at the right moment and wielded her own magical gifts to

stall for time, Mizurei would likely be little more than smoldering ruins at this precise moment. She wore that smile now, the one that Kennett had seen as she corrected her sister. Her eyes crinkled at the edges, her teeth showing just the right amount.

He had no way to know whether she was bluffing.

“But of course, we are honored and delighted to be of service to the Empress and to you. Mizurei, gem that it is, must be protected from further pressures. You have turned already into such a fine diamond, it would not do to see you chip now.” Kennett hoped his smile was as convincing as Naviya's.

“Mizurei is my home. I hope to continue to protect and steward my 'diamond' for many years to come. But with the tragic passing of Hina, it is all too important that we establish what may happen when I am no longer capable of being Mizurei's steward. It is to that end that we seek to connect with the formidable Cashells.”

Kennett fought not to blush. A proposal? Already? He looked to Amaya for a signal of how to respond. Her beauty washed over him and suddenly he could not stop the blush from creeping across his cheeks. Eyes locked on his, she gave a gentle smile. Then, unless his eyes played tricks on him, the tiniest of head shakes.

Kennett forced a breath. “Of course my family would be delighted to connect with the honorable Sogas. What manner of connection might you be seeking?” He tore his eyes from Amaya and tried to get any read on Naviya. To no avail.

“Amaya never was intended to inherit my title. We would like to ensure she is prepared to do so. Accordingly, we request that she be permitted to join your family's studies on politics and etiquette. We will, of course, contribute to the funds required by your instructor.”

Immediately, Kennett surveyed the table. Naviya wore that same inscrutable smile. Amaya kept her lips hidden behind her crimson fan, but the light dancing off her eyes promised merriment.

Sakura did not look pleased or entertained, her entire face scrunched as though she'd taken a large bite of lemon.

"Pah!" she spat "Learn from the Cashells? As though we have not correctly instructed our heir apparent! As though they know better simply because they are from the heart of the empire and we are from the edges? Amaya is talented and poised, she has no need to follow in this rabble's footsteps. I know you by reputation, boy." Sakura's eyes narrowed as she glared at Kennett. "You are a young dabbler, a rascal. You have Manifested no gifts, but you take guests to your bedchambers as though you are a recognized adult. And an Azure lord behaving as such no less! I expressly forbid it!" She banged her fist on the table and stood, turning away from the tea spill she'd left behind and started to walk off.

"Sister." Had the word come from Kennett's mother, he would have expected it to be bitter cold. Instead, it was said so gently and with such warmth that Kennett briefly forgot the vitriol that had just been vented at him.

"I appreciate your counsel, as always. But I will remind you that I am head of this house. As such, the actions of my daughter will be resolved by myself and herself and no others. She will pursue this course of action, should the Cashells be willing to forgive our household after you have shown them such blatant disrespect."

Sakura turned on her heel. Her face was red, her eyes bulging, and she took a deep breath--

"You are dismissed." Amaya's voice echoed through the room. Now fire sat behind the young woman's eyes, and her first curled around her fan. Fury in her face, Sakura bowed again and made her exit.

"Please accept my sincerest apologies for my aunt's behavior. I am afraid she does not like to become involved in matters of the empire, and your family's presence makes such matters inescapable. I hope you will still bring our request to your mother. I would be delighted to see you more regularly." Amaya returned to her soft and perfect outward appearance. She reached an arm across the table and placed her fingertips on Kennett's wrist.

"N-naturally. I will take the message to Irene. I sincerely hope she approves." This time the smile was genuine as he placed his hand on Amaya's, feeling her soft fingers.

"Excellent. Then we may consider that matter resolved and move on to more enjoyable topics. How was your journey? Not too eventful I trust."

The tea turned to more mundane topics. When he said goodbye an hour later, Amaya kissed his cheek in parting.

It was still burning as the carriage arrived back at the Cashell residence.

Chapter Four

Lesson in the Woods

Amaya Soga joined the lessons on etiquette the very next week, the funds being resolved by the two heads of houses through numerous messengers. Kennett's mother greeted the final agreement with a true warm smile. Kennett found himself wondering if her smiles would be so broad if Amaya Soga was a nobody, a rebel peasant set against the empire. Tobias clapped him round the shoulders and declared that they would make beautiful babies—and that he was delighted to have their parents talking about something other than his own matchmaking prospects.

The first class was stiff. Ector, his plump dark-skinned etiquette teacher, accepted nothing less than excellence. When Amaya gave her introduction, she didn't get past her family name.

"Well met, instructor Ector. I am honored to be in your presence. I am Amaya Soga, daughter of Naviya Soga--"

"*Lady* Naviya Soga. Your mother is landed, wed and a well-respected member of the Role of Ruby Ladies, second only to The Empress and her closest Silver allies. To call her by her name without title inspires questions of familial affiliation, inappropriate when greeting a stranger in a formal setting." Then he bowed, his back perfectly straight, waist dipping him almost over double.

"I am Ector, founder of the house of Odili, granted standing as an Azure Lord by the kindness and wisdom of the Empress. Shall we begin?"

Ector prowled with obvious glee to stand before his pupils, the hard stone floor of the fort clacking against his wooden shoes. "Let us begin at the beginning. Show me a reverence."

Without missing a beat, both Kennett and Amaya tucked their legs one behind the other and bent at the knees, torsos straight as the pillars that flanked them.

Ector tsked. "Passable. Kennett, recall that it is critical your sleeves do not droop upon the floor, or you will drag the muck of it about with you all day. Amaya, it is tradition in the mainland for ladies to lift their skirts when they reverence."

Kennett blushed and raised his arms, while Amaya scooped her skirts into her palms.

"Better. Amaya, were you to meet Azure Lord Salome at a soiree, what would be the proper form of address?" Ector drilled.

"Your Lordship." Amaya fired off.

"No. That is what you would call a lord who outranks you. The proper demarcation for a lord of like or lesser rank is "Your Grace."

"Very well, Your Grace." Amaya replied, her fists balled around her skirts and her teeth clenched shut.

"Kennett. Recite the Rhyme of Ranking."

Kennett's back hurt from holding the reverence. His legs ached.

"Gold we follow, our Empress grand

Who rules o'er all the Empire's land

Silver voices we must heed

Their wishes thus become our creed

Role of Ladies Ruby Red

Our lives and fashions thusly led

Noble Azure, least of lords

Protect well your peasant wards.

Alabaster makers in halls of trade

The common and the noble braid

Sturdy Mud, who plants the field

Share the bounty of your yield

Hated Ash, born of foes

Inherit all the Empire's woes

So it has been for centuries past

Empress willing, long will it last."

He rattled off the nursery rhyme and prayed silently that his teacher would let him stand up soon.

"Acceptable. Amaya, give the traditional toast when the Empress is not present at a gathering."

Amaya wobbled a little on her feet. "To the Empress, the Empire that she rules, and those gathered here. We live to honor and service the Empress and Empire so long as she wills it. In Her name."

Ector squared up to Amaya, portly brown belly protruding toward thin dancer's muscle. "No. Your execution is clumsy and your stamina insufficient. Give the traditional toast when the Empress is present."

Amaya opened her mouth, but no sound came out. Red streaked across her cheeks, and little sparks leapt from her fingertips.

"Kennett. Complete the task for Her Ladyship."

Sheepishly, Kennett murmured. "To Your Royal Highness and the land you shelter. May my life honor and serve you. In Her name."

"I've no purpose to know that! The Empress has not graced Mizurei with her presence in two centuries!" Amaya blurted out and dropped her reverence, eyes glowering at Ector.

Ector snapped open his fan, jet black with emerald green tips. "I see. Here." He pulled a large, dusty tome from the shelf at the end of the classroom and thrust it at Amaya. "Study. I will see you again on the morrow, when I trust you will have soothed your temper enough to resume our lessons."

Amaya curtsied curtly, took the book and turned on her heel, walking out without a word.

"Must you be so hard on her, Odili?" Kennett asked.

“I am afraid I must. She has much to learn, Cashell. More than you, as she will lead a house rather than endeavor to elevate its standing purely in the public eye. With half the time to learn it, no less.”

Amaya returned the next day and spent the lesson in silence. Ector ran them through the steps of each of the dozen most popular courtly dances, then through half a dozen more obscure ones. Where her words had been clumsy, Amaya's dancing was flawless. Kennett found himself coated in sweat, out of breath, long before Amaya glistened with the faintest moisture. At the end of that lesson, Ector dismissed the pair with a stubborn grimace. “Well enough. Tomorrow we will move on, and you will need your tongue as well as your feet.”

Again, Amaya swanned out, though Kennett caught her spine straightening as she left.

Throughout that week Ector corrected every mistake no matter how miniscule. His pupils recited ancient oaths, memorized the names now present on the Role of Ruby Ladies, perfected delivery of the History of the Cataclysm and dates of the Spirit War. Kennett particularly struggled to recall the names of generals and the monsters they battled over the four hundred years the war ran hot. Amaya tripped over and over again through the original texts of the Empress's first edicts.

“Let it be known that all who serve The Empire shall be thus shielded. Those serving the rank I have bestowed must care for those below them, ensuring their safety, shelter and necessities are met.”

“Those serving *at* the rank I have bestowed *them*.’ Again, from the beginning.” Ector's flabby brown eyes threw withering looks at Amaya whenever he corrected her. She no longer burst her emotions directly at him, instead venting her frustrations in clenched jaws and tight fists pressed against her sides.

When the week ended, Ector frowned from his lectern at his students. "Passable. We shall proceed next week with physical etiquette. Be sure you are prepared."

Amaya never lingered at lesson's end, despite Kennett's wistful glances her direction. Instead, she headed promptly to her carriage and returned to the Soga residence, leaving him at Ector's mercy.

"She learns quickly. You would do well to follow her example." Ector said on the chilly Friday afternoon, then exited himself through the door at the back of the classroom.

Good as his word, the next week the students spent half their time in the stone classroom practicing how to greet one another: with eyes steadily looking at each other. How to receive a gift or dish: only with their right hand. How to exit the Empress's presence: never turning their back on her.

The other half they spent in the cold grounds, ensuring the perfect reverence, the ideal height one's garden ought to be trimmed to, how heavily one's feet should slap against the stones to announce one's presence without being rude.

Ector used few words to correct them, instead using his fan as a stick, nudging or whapping his students into the correct behavior. Kennett had a light bruise at the base of his spine where he'd been struck into proper poise. Amaya sported a red mark on her left wrist where she'd repeatedly reached to pick up her teacup.

Fall had settled in. On the last day of the second week's lessons, Ector set them to crossing a field covered in dead leaves without causing them to rustle—or to displace the one placed on their heads. Kennett struggled to move so gently as to prevent a breeze from snatching his. When Amaya's dropped for what must have been the thirteenth time, her strained patience finally snapped.

“What is the purpose of this exercise!? When will I need to move so softly as to not crinkle leaves? When I am made head of the paper-waste house, or when you have finally driven me mad with every banality such that I am lost in the woods with nothing better to do than balance leaves upon my head!?”

Ector's teeth showed in what was all too obviously not a smile.

“Young Lady Soga. I have been an instructor for as long as you have been alive. I have taught Mud until they were elevated to Rubies, raised Silver from birth, been recognized for my contributions to the Empire by *the Empress herself*, and you dare question my methods?”

Amaya's hair slid out of the perfect bun. “I dare question what exactly it is you bother to teach! Poise is one thing, but this is patently outrageous. Even the pupil you have worked with for years cannot manage this feat, and you expect me to perform it in a fortnight? You have no right to treat me so; you may be of like rank; certainly, however I and my family pay your dues and at the end of the day if I wish to seek instruction elsewhere it shall be you who is out your pay, and plenty of other instructors to ensure I master skills that are *useful*.”

Her face flushed, eyes glinting, fury poured off her. Kennett's heart beat fast, unsure whether he ought to say something to support the beautiful vision of rage before him or defend his teacher.

“Pah! I see the next generation raised with no respect for the old ways. You will take the lessons I indulge to teach you, young lady. And you will enjoy them—because you are correct.” The smile across Odili's lips suddenly reached his eyes, mirth twinkled across his dancing fingertips as they snatched a leaf from the breeze. “I serve at your pleasure. If it does not please you to learn the skills that I believe to be essential to your success, far be it from me to correct you. What shall we have next, my lady? Crochet or dancing?”

Disgust etched in her eyes, Amaya Soga turned and stormed out of the clearing.

Ector laughed. Kennett, heart still pounding, chased after her into the woods.

“Mind you bring back the heiress in one piece, young Cashell, or it will be worth your head!”

There was too much truth in that sentiment for Kennett's taste. Along he crunched through the fall leaves, the trail of Amaya's flowing skirts scattering them behind her.

Beautiful and tempestuous. What would it mean to have such a beacon by his side, and how could he stand out next to her?

Lost in his thoughts, blindly following the trail of his quarry, Kennett jumped when a voice emerged from behind him.

“Lordling, what are you doing?”

Melodious and unmistakable, Kennett forced two long breaths before turning to see Sky. “And what is a sailor doing so far inland?”

Gone was the fine blue leather, the gold-white cap; in their stead a simple white shirt with blue trousers short enough to hike over one's knee to go wading, and a plain white bandana tied tightly around short, well-kept dreadlocks. The smile, however, was identical.

“Ah ah, I asked first. I certainly wouldn't expect to find you here. Chasing a fox, perhaps? Or is there another young gentleman I should be aware of?” The tree he was leaning on shook with his laughter, depositing red-brown leaves on the coated forest floor.

Kennett flushed. “A fellow student ran off during our lesson. I did not wish to leave her alone.” Sky must be no more than ten paces away from him; if Kennett had not seen him dive

into the water and never emerge, he would have wondered how the man got so close. "Your turn now."

Sky stretched and yawned, flashing a mouthful of shining white teeth and deep red lips. "I never said I was only a sailor. I'm here on business. A meeting, but it's over now." Two gentle strides brought him onto the path that Amaya had left behind. The leaves did not so much as tremble under his feet.

"Why linger, then?" The woods were technically the property of the Cashells, granted by the Empress on their assignation to this miserable damp town. Kennett could have Sky charged...*If I'm fool enough to think a guardswoman can catch him.*

"The day is sunny and the trees are lovely. Do I need more of a reason?" Seeing Kennett's cold expression, Sky paused. "Very well. Perhaps I was seeking to enjoy these particular woods, because I happened to know that they were assigned to a particular family, and that on this particular day a particular member of that particular family would be taking a particular lesson that, if it went well, might inspire him to explore a bit of the woods without his typical horde of chaperones and guardswomen flanking his every step."

"How did you--?"

"Ector is fond of a good ale as most men are, and men filled with ale are liable to discuss matters that aren't secrets in places where they can be overheard. But I didn't come here to discuss your teacher, or the student who has clearly surpassed you if she was permitted to go off before you. I came to invite you on a walk in the woods. Would you do me the honor of escorting me through your woodlands, Lord Cashell?" As he spoke, Sky closed the remaining distance between them. He did not reach out or brush against Kennett. No, he just locked his eyes on the young Cashell and kept them there. Kennett sought solace in the trees, in the birds

on the branches. It did not matter where he directed his gaze, every time he came back, those electrifying brown eyes were locked on his own.

“O-of course.” Kennett cursed himself for the stammer. What was he, a lad at his first blush? To save face, he pivoted and began walking through the woods. For a time silence reigned, only the crunching of leaves and flit of bird wings marking their passage. Kennett knew he should be worried about Amaya, but in the here and now he felt his focus completely drawn in by Sky.

“How are you enjoying Mizurei?”

A beat of silence. “Well enough. It is...much different than the imperial city. But the people are...” *friendly? Welcoming?* “Competent. And yourself? I would have anticipated a sailor to have left port before now.”

Sky's smile curled, mischief tinting the edges. “If I were only a sailor, that would be true. Mizurei has its own purposes. And diversions.” The distance between the two young men was best measured in breaths as they wandered along no route in particular. “Best not to get too distracted, though. There are rebels and rascals around these parts.” Sky clasped his hand on Kennett's shoulder, leaning in to whisper conspiratorially “And you're with one of them. Are you scared, Nettie?”

Kennett stopped in his tracks. He should be. He should be terrified, alone with a spirit in the woods. No one to know where he was, to come looking for him if he went missing. Pivoting on the shoulder, Kennett faced Sky. “Should I be?”

The rounded lips, gentle eyelashes and broad nose. Simply dressed, Sky radiated beauty all the same. “Depends what scares you.” Second arm around Kennett, Sky pressed their foreheads together.

"I know you're not what you appear." Kennett gasped, breath coming fast and uneven.

"No one is what they appear." Sky kissed him.

It started gentle; unsure. Barely connecting, chapped salt-sea worn lips brushing against soft ones. When Kennett stayed, the kiss changed. His arms wrapped around Sky's shoulders, knees bending into the shorter man. Lips shifted in unison, dancing as though choreographed. More than once, Sky's teeth scraped across Kennett's skin making him shudder. The shorter man's arms wrapped around Kennett's waist, lean muscle holding him close.

Some kisses feel they last a lifetime, others only moments. Kennett had no concept of how long this one lasted. He only knew, when Sky pulled away, that he wished the kiss could have continued.

"W—who are you?" The words escaped, though their arms still held one another close.

Sky laughed. Gods, that melody, that rhythm, that cadence. That laugh could make a miser smile, could bring the sternest instructor to merriment. "I told you. A rascal. A rebel. Someone who could be dangerous for you to spend time with."

"But who ARE you?" Kennett repeated.

For the first time, Sky's eyes lost their glow. A frown graced his handsome face. "I'm a wanderer. Looking to make my way, and to make the world a better place. What more do you need to know?"

Kennett broke the hold, putting five paces between them before turning to continue. "You want to make the world a better place, but you're working with people who burned the pier? You can walk without leaving trace, bury yourself in water only to emerge unscathed. I ask a third

time and demand an answer. Who are you!" Kennett's pulse raced, fire burning his veins. His teeth ground together, eyes narrowed.

"Don't make me answer that. You don't want to know my sordid story any more than you want to be on my arm when I next set sail." His voice rang like metal scraping on porcelain; a sound that took what should have been beautiful and made it harsh, bitter. When Kennett didn't reply, Sky stood straight. His shoulders back, eyes mirthless, he answered. "I am Singer of Sapphire Skies. I am as human as you, a bard and sailor. I am both lover and fighter, and I am tired of the deathly mistakes of the empire. I will make it right or die trying; I will never be your happy little husband, never sit in your family's lounge sipping tea with your mother and hoping to win her approval." Sky delivered this last with a tone that could shatter glass. Then he turned and vanished into the woods, leaving Kennett dumbstruck behind him.

The Storm

The woods sat silent; the sun having dipped beyond the horizon. Songbirds slept in the branches, Owls not yet having stirred. No wind ruffled the branches, no creatures of the earth skittered along the uneven roots. Mizurei held its breath.

Yamato lingered deep in the woods, waiting for his contact to arrive. Little wisps of flame skipped from fingertip to fingertip, leaving smoke rising skyward. If the young man were much later, Yamato would have to return to his duties and the entire plan would be scuttled.

Frankly, the plan was a touch far-fetched. The first step had gone far enough awry he'd been tempted to scrap the whole thing and start fresh. Certainly, the desired goal had been achieved, though the price was far too high. Still, the people needed change, and they needed it now.

And your time is limited anyway. Soleil's warm voice purred in Yamato's ear.

Something skittered across the forest floor, and flame poured from Yamato's fingertips scorching what turned out to be an early-rising possum to ash and bone.

My, my. So jumpy. One would think you were planning to destroy a centuries-old government and plunge the 'civilized' world into chaos!

Then the spirit that shared his form laughed, heat spreading from his core until smoke dribbled from between his lips. He coughed and spluttered as the smoke filled his lungs.

"Having fun?" Yamato's contact, a short black man, stood smirking in front of him.

"You're late." Yamato grumbled. Calling his contact a "man" seemed over-generous. From his high voice and lack of beard, he couldn't be older than Yamato's daughter.

“Had a tail to lose. The new guards from the Cashell household are regrettably diligent.”

Yamato scoffed. “Yes, that was rather the point. We bring enough attention to get to the stone. We’ve done well to turn Her eyes towards us, but the Empress will not risk her power for so meaningless a trifle as a noblewoman’s death. It is time to cause cacophony sufficient she cannot turn away.”

Then a look of concern settled across the young man’s face. “Are you certain? There will be no hiding from the next step, title or no. Should anyone discover—”

“I never planned to hide behind my title. I would think you rather more afraid for your own skin, with nothing but your spirit-given gifts to protect you.”

The contact’s shiny-white teeth glinted in the rising moonlight. “And my charm!”

Yamato didn’t laugh.

The contact’s face settled into a grimace. “I understand the risks. I wouldn’t have signed on if I hadn’t. I’m ready to die for freedom, if that is the price.”

“Then enough chat. Let’s begin.”

Water poured from the young man. It roared from the tips of his dreadlocks, dripped from his fingers, seeped through his shoes. Spewing from his mouth, the entire area quickly filled with crystal-blue water glinting in the moonlight.

“Ready?” Yamato said to his spirit.

And willing she chortled her response.

White-hot flame crashed out of Yamato, hissing and steaming as it met the water. His eyes burned blue, fingers scorched with flames fleeing his body. The water vapor rose, clouds billowing into existence.

In minutes the sky darkened, moon tucked behind dark clouds. Layers of water settled heavy in the heavens, ripe for the plucking.

Yamato's eyes ached and his throat burned. Finally, his body gave in and the fire dwindled to sparks.

His contact stopped the water, drinking back in the last drops that hadn't made it off the ground.

Yamato hacked and coughed, his entire body contorted in pain. Soleil's power could reshape the world, but she exacted a proportional cost.

Oooh, can't do that again any time soon. Or you'll be ash, just like—

Yamato didn't listen. He knew the price. Hearing Soleil's smug voice recount it would do nothing to ease his agony.

"—Hey! I can't be responsible for your torched corpse. Come on!" His contact hissed, a trickle of water from his palm dripping down Yamato's forehead and hissing to steam.

"Calm down. I will not die today." Yamato coughed up a lungful of ash. He was grateful for the young man's assistance, but he had work to complete.

"If you say so. We've primed it; how do we trigger it?" The contact looked up at the dark angry sky, already threatening to pour down a deluge.

“Leave that to me.” Yamato sat up and pulled a tiny, perfect pearl from his pocket. The stone swirled back and forth in his palm driven by the haul of winds stuffed within. “Get away from here. We can’t afford for you to be discovered.”

“Nor you. At least I can walk.” The man retorted.

Yamato hauled himself to his feet, wheezing the whole way. “So can I. Now go. I’ll complete my task and take my respite in my home.”

The young man looked like he wanted to argue, but Yamato’s wrinkled face wreathed in smoke wore stony eyes unwilling to argue. So off his contact went, and Yamato spun the pearl between his palms. The winds inside tore free, swirling up and out. Tree branches rustled, leaves tumbled and a howl twisted through the woods.

A great thunder rent the heavens, and twin forks of lightning tore from sky to earth. Dry trees caught flame, and a torrent of rain cascaded down. Wind lashed the flames to a blaze, water hard and heavy pounding the earth.

As Yamato worked his way home, windows shattered, trees creaked and smashed through nearby buildings torn up by the winds. Waters rose and flooded, erasing the shoreline along the coasts of Mizurei. More thunder clapped and rolled, drowning out the shouts of the townsfolk desperately seeking aid.

“Lordship! Thank the Empress you’re here! The school, it’s burning! One of the trees caught, and the wind is too great. We can’t contain it!” A guardswoman shouted into the gale.

Yamato strode forward and extended his hand, pulling a first lick of fire into his palm. He smiled.

Mission Accomplished.

Winter

Chapter Five

Cold Dawn

Kennett lingered for a gracious moment on the brink of sleep. He had dreamed of a beautiful young man and a passionate kiss, of a woman mighty and magnificent who danced with him all night long as laughter and music rang around the hall.

Waking to the bitter cold of the first of winter setting in was disappointing to say the least. It seemed the storm last evening gave up the ghost of autumn. Dragging himself from the bed, Kennett realized the windows had been locked shut.

His father did not close the windows unless he had something serious on his mind; he typically found the breeze to be comforting whether a piece of warmth from summer or blast of cold from winter. Something was wrong.

Suddenly concerned, Kennett dashed down the stairs still in his night clothes.

Tobias, Irene and Daithi gathered around the table. The conversation in full swing, Kennett plopped in his seat and listened.

“...matter if the Sogas are aware of any threat. The storm blew in from apparently nowhere and disappeared the same way. The locals may not know what that means, but we know better.” Irene's voice stank of pride.

"I disagree. It absolutely matters; they are the experts on their land, not us. If the Soga don't believe this was the work of spirits, I believe them." Kennett's father's tone was conciliatory, gentle.

"Then you're twice the fool I took you for. Where is this optimism coming from, Daithi? Even you knew enough to close our windows, I would not have believed this degree of naivete!" Irene snapped back at him.

Daithi's voice, soft and low, measured its way across the room. "There are people who are as capable of commanding the skies and storms as spirits. You know this, dearest wife. It is all too possible that someone who shares my gifts used them for their own purposes, grabbed an eddy of already-brewing wind and blew it into a storm. I've done it myself at sea."

"Dad's got a point. Humans are capable of all kinds of things once they Manifest." Tobias poured himself a cup of tea and avoided Irene's eyes.

Kennett wished he knew. Just another thing his inability to Manifest kept him out of.

"And I'm telling you that no Manifested human could have done that alone. Not as well as the disaster at the pier, the growth of the rebellion. The spirits have laid siege to Mizurei, and we must request assistance from the Empire post-haste or risk losing an uneasy peace that has rested here for four hundred years!" Irene's temper made her finger tremble as she pointed it at Daithi.

"It's too soon to call them. If we ask for help when we've been here so brief a time the Empress will take these lands back, place another family in charge and we will be disgraced. We might even lose our standing. Are you willing to inflict that on our sons?" Daithi's talent lay in making pointed words sound like pillow talk. Each word was uttered so gently, his eyes full of such wonder and love as he gazed at his wife, that she could not help but be moved.

Kennett held his breath, hoping his mother's fury would not cascade onto him.

Irene forced an exhale. "Fine. If we are not to call on official aid, what else shall we do? I am not content to let this matter rest, Daithi."

"We can't ask the common people for help. They have no time or space, not with the challenges they're already facing. The disruption of the pier, the heightened price of livestock--" Tobias interjected.

"No one is suggesting that we ask lower tiers for help in this matter. It is our sacred duty to manage this matter, as the highest tier family and as people who have Manifested. We will resolve this matter, and we will resolve it without asking the Empire for help. I am no more interested in letting the questions come to a close here than you are, Irene. We will find out who did this, why they did it, and what we can do to make sure there is no repeat performance." Daithi replied.

"How?" Irene's glower fixed on her husband.

"I think it's time for Fionnbarra to see our new home." The smile he wore matched that of a cat who had swallowed a canary.

Kennett sat stock still, hoping against hope that Irene would find some reason to say no.

A smile cracked its way across Irene's face. "Yes. That I can agree with. After all, we've been here for some moons and he has not yet made the time to visit. I'm certain his aunt Ynid will fill him with all sorts of interesting tales of wild storms and out-of-control rebellions. My dear eldest, he simply cannot prevent himself digging deeply into any piece of folklore or mystery no matter how obscure or irrelevant. I shall write to him at once and see that he is given leave from his naval duties to meet his new neighbors and reconnect with his kin." She stood, folded her

arms across her chest and turned to exit. “Oh, and someone should go to my dear sister-in-law to make sure she's ready for guests. Kennett, you should be able to manage that.” Irene Cashell swanned out of the room.

“B-but my lessons--” Kennett protested feebly. He didn’t want a task he was ‘able to manage’, he wanted respect. At least Ector gave him that much.

“They've been canceled for the day. Apparently, Ector's home was turned rather inside out by the storm and he needs time to put it back in order.” Tobias mused, his relief at a day without poetry practice evident in his relaxed shoulders and easy grin.

“Enough drama for one morning. Let's have our breakfast.” Daithi gestured to the servants who came bearing trays of fresh sausage, sweet rolls baked to flaky perfection, and tart apples topped with a fine custard.

All through breakfast Kennett barely spoke. His brother and father discussed progress in poetry classes and the absurd price of sheep on the island, they debated which of the rolls had the best filling, nattered about the latest accomplishments of Fionn. But Kennett couldn't focus, his mind kept drifting. Amaya storming off—had she gotten home safely, with the storm arriving hours later?--the kiss and argument with Sky—what did he have to do with the storm? Kennett believed him when he declared he was a rebel, but as to whether he was a human? That was another issue entirely.

The lion's share of his thoughts, however, were focused on his brother. Fionn had always been the golden child. Brilliant, with top marks from each of his tutors for as long as Kennett could remember. He'd joined the Imperial Navy at 16. His command of sea and sky earned him the rank of first mate in under two years. In the Battle of Akulli his mastery of his manifestation led him to destroying the ice spirit leading the enemy forces. Less than a year after that he was

a Captain of his own vessel, the youngest in a century. Not long after that he'd wed Zufan Kebede, herself a respected Silver Lady and military commander. The only conceivable stain on Fionn's reputation was that he was not yet a father; though since he was handsome and active the public simply assumed he was awaiting his official designation of Commodore before retiring to raise a family.

He also knew almost every mistake Kennett had ever made.

With breakfast ended, Kennett excused himself. Over and over again he tried on an outfit, settled his hair, pinned his hat and checked the mirror only to hate what he saw. This was too formal, that too casual. This one held memories of the last few days, that one so old that he had since outgrown it. Finally he selected simple trousers and a tunic, draping a heavy fur cloak around his shoulders. At least no one would complain he was indecent.

The air blustered cold and vicious on his way to the carriage. For a moment he reconsidered his plans. Was it really worth pursuing, on a cold hard day when he'd received such ill news?

"Where to, my lord?" the steerswoman asked.

"Several stops today. But the first must be to the residence of Ector Odili."

Ector's home could best be described as a cross between a palace and a bungalow. In footprint it was no larger than most servant's quarters. Despite that ten of the minute structure could have fit into any properly apportioned ballroom, Kennett could not help but quirk an eyebrow at the quality of the display. A proper slated stone roof perched on a quartet of perfect miniature pillars carved out of deadwood, displaying the four modern interpretations of the elements. Here, the empress called fire to her very tread. There the water swirled like elegant ribbon from her sleeves. The wind whipped through the elegant tresses perched on her head as

birds sang overhead, the stone cracking in her clenched fist on the last one. Two windows of stained glass graced the sides of the door, one displaying the Cashell clan crest of a sailing ship and two gulls overhead. On the other, the Odili black cat looked on with twinkling green eyes, sharp claws bared despite the curving smile on the creature's lips.

Kennett exited the carriage. Strolling towards the front door, Kennett reckoned with the damage from the storm. Two evergreens toppled over, crushing the delicate tea plants beneath them. A gust made the branches rustle and encouraged Kennett to swiftly enter his teacher's abode.

"Ector Odili?" Kennett called, knocking on the door.

"I'm not available for counsel today. You'll simply have to return--" Ector stopped cold to see Kennett on his doorstep. "Your grace. How might I be of service?"

Ector looked disheveled. He wore no fine robes. He had neither shaved his face nor combed his hair by the look of it, and a brief flash of scent as the door opened told Kennett he had not applied his perfumes this morning either.

"I was told there were to be no lessons today due to the ill effect that the storm had upon your home. I came to ensure that all was well with my instructor; it would not do to have you unavailable for too long." Kennett's response was automatic, half-thought as he tried to peer into the room behind Ector. It wasn't like his teacher to miss a day of tutoring without proper notice. It also wasn't like the man to open the door in such a state. Whoever he had been anticipating, it certainly wasn't his pupil—and whatever he was doing it somehow ranked more importantly than either his job or his etiquette.

"Forgive my crude appearance, your grace. I have indeed been turned rather upside-down by the storm last evening. Your well-wishes are taken to heart. Now, begging your

pardon, I must return to the tasks of managing my household so that we may commence our lessons on the morrow.” Without waiting for Kennett's permission, Ector snapped the door shut. Kennett heard the latch click into place.

Taken aback, Kennett stood for several breaths in the cold air. Why was Ector so tense? The glances he had managed to steal around his teacher implied that the mess stretched beyond the man himself. A candlestick on its side, papers strewn across the floor. A cushion that had been ripped apart, scent of downy feathers lingering in the air. What could have prompted such an ordered man to live in such squalor and disarray?

Shaking his head, Kennett tucked his hands under his arms to keep them from the cold, then turned back to the carriage. As the driver set them to their next destination, Kennett noticed one more detail. In the edge of the window that held the Odili predatory feline, a small pane of glass was missing. Cracks in the rest of the window seemed to say it had been shattered rather than intentionally removed.

Kennett's mind wandered to the kinds of damage on display. The ride to Aunt Ynid's place took him through the heart of town. The storm had not been kind; many windows were shattered. Trees had fallen—mostly next to rather than on buildings, thank the Empress—but there was a single home that had been cleaved nearly in two by the ancient maple tree that now sat, roots hanging in the air, trunk through the tea chamber. Some patches of stone were slick with freshly frozen ice, others sported drifting pieces of ash where lightning had ignited nearby wood. Twice the carriage turned down a side street to avoid a closure. The guardswomen busied themselves tidying the mess, and Kennett recognized several members of both his and the Soga's household guiding and aiding the effort.

At length the carriage arrived at the residence of Ynid Cashell. Her estate nearly untouched by the storm, it was clear that she had spent her own considerable Manifestation

guarding it. The path to the door curled and swooped through rows of hedges and evergreens, imported from back home and maintained by meticulous yardwork. Ten paces down the road Kennett felt shielded, sheltered from prying eyes by the height of the growth beside him.

Woodworked creatures bedecked the stoop to his great aunt's home. Life-sized birds chirped as the wind whistled through them, miniature fish leaping out and splashing into the ocean-hued baseboards. Seated in the cold winter air in little more than an elegant night gown, the wrinkled form of Ynid cackled up at Kennett from a rocking chair.

"So, come to check on your dear auntie, have we?" Despite the chill, she neither shivered nor curled in on herself. For all the world one would think it was the middle of summer. Ynid sipped a cold glass of juice and smirked up at Kennett. With a regal wave of a single hand she bade him sit.

Kennett perched on the chair. "I have come to check on you, auntie. As well as to bring you news."

"Got her to propose already, have you?" Ynid's eyes never winked. Instead, the right side of her lip curled up in a delicious smirk. "I knew you were charming, Ken, but I don't think you've ever gotten someone to fall for you quite so quickly. Unless you've already bedded her and she fears she is with child!"

"N-no. Auntie—" Kennett stammered.

"Oh, catch your breath. I jest. If you had procured such an arrangement I'd no doubt be hearing it from Irene in her primmest, most holier-than-thou tone long before you had any chance to tell me yourself. Now what news did you come here to deliver?"

Kennett forced a long breath. “Fionn is coming home. Mama is sending the letter as we speak; I was bade to ensure that you and your home are ready for visitors.”

“I suppose Irene wants to preserve the privacy of the happy couple.” Ynid snorted. “My home is always prepared. For guests, to host, to abandon and enjoy the sea for a decade. What do you actually wish to discuss?”

Kennett clenched his mouth tight, forcing his jaw closed. How Ynid always knew what thoughts ran beneath his surface bewildered him. Tobias had sworn she could read thoughts like the most powerful of spirits, Fionn claimed she had a grandmaster spy network that reported to her at all times.

Kennett believed she had learned to read the faces and bodies of those she spoke to so acutely, she could fool them into believing she knew everything. Then get them to talk about it by pretending she knew what they were going to say before they said it.

He hoped to have that skill some day.

“I am...less than thrilled to have Fionn coming home.”

“And for good reason. He's always shone so brightly, one needs those special spectacles to look at him head-on.”

“I just wish he'd stay abroad! He's married, he has a career, he's Manifested, he has everything! Can't he leave me alone?”

“Calm yourself, child. Have some juice, it will help you think. The oranges are particularly sweet this time of year.” Clapping her hands, a servant instantly emerged from inside bearing a glass full of juice. Obediently, Kennett sipped it. He choked and spluttered.

“That's not orange juice!”

“Of course not. It's perfectly good grapefruit juice. You just weren't expecting it. Try it again, I think you'll quite like it.”

Hesitantly Kennett took a small sip. Tangy and powerful, slight hints of sweet underneath. Delightful.

“Now don't you like it all the better for having your expectations correctly set? Nephew, as long as you compare yourself to your brother you will be playing his game with his pieces. Endeavoring to win a gamble that he has had six years before you to rig in his favor is a losing battle.” Ynid drank long and slow from her glass, finally tipping the last drops into her mouth and placing it with a thud back down. “That doesn't decrease your value. It just means it's time to stop pretending that you're a mediocre fish when what you are is an exceptional bird.”

Kennett sat in silence for a while, sipping his juice. He daren't meet his aunt's eyes. He found his mind replaying the last several weeks, the ball where he'd met Sky and Amaya, the shock of the damage at the port, meeting with Naviya and Sakura, the botched lesson, the kiss, the fight, the storm. His heart beat in his chest double-time.

“Auntie, can I ask you something?”

“Anything. Though I don't promise the answer to be fit for young one's ears.” She replied, her grin stretching to her own ears.

“How do you know if you're in love?”

“Oh dear. It's hard to say. In my experience, it looks different on different people. For your mother, it's a place where she doesn't have to be so strong. For your father, it's when he

feels the desire to spend time with them rather than his work. Fionn always seemed to like someone he could match wits with."

"How did you know you were in love with my uncle?"

"Bah! Sentimental rubbish. Your uncle and I were a dynamic duo. Two halves of the same coin; he managed the upright and proper presentation, and I handled finishing business that needed to be finished." Ynid's tone didn't match her words, her eyes cast down in remembrance, hands folded warmly in her lap, lips small and even. "As for you! Does he make your heart race? Does she make you short of breath? Does the thought of them bring a smile to your lips and a twinkle to your eye? The times you've let your heart carry you too far, these are what I've seen." She finished eyes up, piercing through Kennett.

He looked away.

"I'd...rather we didn't talk about those times."

"Of course you would! Your heart's been broken more times than most twice your age. But only because your heart is so open. Your love runs deep, and it runs hot. You've not yet had the experience of letting it cool and seeing what's left behind. All your romances have been hidden, lurking behind clever words and brilliant presentation, ending when you and your poor brothers got back on that accursed ship and sailed to wherever the Empress bid your mother do her dirty work next!" Ynid's voice got cold and even as she spoke, so that by the end she sounded so much like Irene that Kennett flinched.

Ynid creaked her bones out of the rocking chair and stood beside him, hand on his own. "Oh Kenny. Some day you will not be forced to turn and run. Some day you will settle in with someone and get to know what happens to love once the passion has faded, to feel the rock

underneath—or the shifting sands fall away beneath your feet. It's up to you to build that structure beyond the beginning.”

“But how do I KNOW if it's sand or rock?” Fear grabbed Kennett’s gut, twisting ice-cold through his abdomen.

Ynid sat back down and stared at him. Her grey-green eyes bore directly into his skull. “Are you not listening? You won't know! You can't know! All you can do is try. Put in the work. Get to know the person, care for who they are, build a way to be with each other. Enough flitting about in the shadows, flirting with people you will never see a future with. You don't need to be looking for a spouse right now, child. But I highly doubt you'll be leaving this island any time soon, so don't think you can casually bed someone and never see them again. You're the ruling family of Mizurei now, it is your home as much as anyone else's. Plant roots, child. Or the wind will snatch you up and blow you off the cliffs into the sea.”

Kennett didn't know how long he sat in silence next to his aunt. It was true, he'd always assumed that until he was married and Manifested, he'd be wandering from one port to the next. At the bidding of the Empress, people had lived and died for less. That he was a man made the situation all the more straightforward. He would never lead the family. The Cashell family line would continue, if at all, through his elder brothers, or through a younger sister should Irene ever become pregnant again. His dalliances—with men, with women, with whoever would help him enjoy the cramped quarters he was stuck in on Irene's ship—may have caused whispers. But none of them resulted in pregnancy or marriage, so it had been swept under the rug.

He was an adult in all senses but his Manifestation now. The reputation of the family, the future of Mizurei; they may very well rest in the hands of he and whoever he bedded next. Fionn was already wed, due to become a proper house husband any time. Tobias had never expressed interest in a mate of any kind, formal or informal. He was likely to become an

eccentric uncle, always rabbiting on about finances and trade. Useful in his own way, but not fit to become the scion of Mizurei.

If Kennett married Amaya—his heart warmed and purred at the prospect—the pair would undoubtedly become the new leadership of Mizurei.

Leaving Sky and his rebellion out in the cold.

“It's the handsome sailor, isn't it?” Ynid's crackling voice interrupted his thoughts.

“How did you—I mean no, he—I mean, who?”

“Heh heh,” Ynid cough-laughed. “Only two people danced with you when you first arrived. A stranger with the muscles of a boatman, and the stunning flame of the Soga clan.

Kennett tried to weigh the two against each other. Amaya, pristine and perfect. Brilliant, clever. She held a drive inside her that he'd only tasted, a fire that could never be quenched. Sky, intense and passionate. Wild as the sea after a storm and twice as unfettered, kisses as ready as rows.

“I...don't know.”

Ynid's hand landed on his. The gnarls and wrinkles pressed against his soft, uncalloused flesh. “You're not the first in our line to wonder about where your heart lands. Do not rush into a decision, or you may regret it for years to come.” Her gaze was unfocused, face turned out to the wide world.

“Do you?”

“Of course not! There was no man better suited to share my house or my bed than dear Thomas. Simply put, when you're as old as I you've seen plenty of people marry the wrong

person for all the wrong reasons. And you hope to spare the next generation from the mistakes you've seen the previous one make. Now, enough lollygagging! Whatever you want, whoever you desire, they're certainly not sitting on this porch with your elderly great-aunt discussing the finer points of grapefruit juice.”

With a surprising amount of force for a woman nearing her eightieth year, Ynid hoisted Kennett to his feet and pushed him so that he stumbled off the porch and back onto the walkway.

Hidden in the pines, Kennett stopped for a breath. She was right.

Sitting on the porch wouldn't solve anything.

Back in the carriage, the steerswoman asked “Where next, your lordship?”

“Take me to the residence of Amaya Soga, by way of the pier if you please. I fancy a walk along the water's edge.”

At a cry from their master, the horses set off at a steady trot to deliver Kennett Cashell to the rebel he'd all-but-fallen for.

Chapter Six

The Water's Edge

The guards escorted Kennett all the way to the edge of the pier, unwilling to leave him alone. Standing with the winter wind biting his face and fingertips, Kennett lost himself in the waves, the whoosh and crash of each building atop each other. His mind couldn't latch on to a thought; stuck on the emptiness and confusion he'd felt after his fight with Sky.

So long Kennett stood there that the guards began to chatter amongst themselves.

Their voices stirred Kennett, and when the topic turned to where to enjoy their next drink, he sat himself on the edge of the dock. Facing out into the water, Kennett's lips formed the words he'd wanted to say.

"Singer of Sapphire Skies?" so softly, inaudible over the tumbling of the waves.

"Halt! Who goes there?" The sound of the lead guardswoman drew a crooked smile across Kennett's lips. *So it had worked after all.*

"The man is my guest, Linnea. Let him approach. We will sit and talk and skip stones a while."

The guardswoman did not appear impressed. But she had no reason to deny her superior's request, so with a huff she stood aside.

“You want to tell me why I’m here?” Sky plonked himself next to Kennett, gazing out to sea in the same direction.

“I—I—” Kennett fumbled. How do you even begin a conversation with someone who you’d just accused of being less than human?

“Lordling I have no time for your blubbering. Say it or move on.” Sky chuckled a rock into the ocean, not even bothering to skip it.

Kennett forced a breath. “I. I wanted to see you.”

“Why? What does that achieve, except to remind you why we’re mismatched so thoroughly?”

“Because—”

“No.” Sky’s tone bore none of its usual melody, flat and hard as steel.

“No?” Kennett couldn’t keep up. Did Sky want an explanation or not?

“No. I will not teach you why you should care about the wrongs of the empire. I will not hold your hand while you realize the bullshit system you thrive in crushes people like me under its heel.”

Anger boiled in Kennett. “You think I built this? I am as bound by the rules as you—”

“Poor little lordling! Living in luxury, waiting to be wed to a woman and waited on hand and foot. Hiding behind big, scary mommy to stay safe and ignorant about anything and everything outside your idealistic little bubble. But yeah, tell me about how societal expectations of being handsome and above half the world is so constricting.” Sky stood, and Kennett turned to look at him.

The tears on the sailor's face surprised the young lord.

"I—"

"No! Save me your grief, your apologies, your guilt. Leave. If you are lucky, we will never see one another again. Now go!"

Heart pumping, head full of heat Kennett swept off the dock without so much as a backward glance.

Back in the carriage, Kennett lost himself in thought.

Kennett's position afforded him many luxuries. He knew this. He also knew, though it was seldom discussed in the ranks of polite society, that many of the humans out in the world lived at the mercy of the spirits. If those magics flooded a farm or scorched a home out in the Borderlands there would be no noble family, no Empire soldiers to see them fed and sheltered.

This is what the Empire is for. To protect the common, to ensure that we defend and uphold the rights of all people, be they the lowliest Ash or the Golden Empress herself.

As he rode, Kennett's gaze lingered outside the window. Even here, at the western outpost of Mizurei, the people ate, slept and worked in safety.

Except when the pier burnt to cinders.

Forcing that thought into a deep, dark corner, Kennett turned his eye to appearances. His hair ruffled, robes bunched in clumsy heaps beneath him. It would not do to arrive at the house of Clan Soga in such a state. With the expertise of one whose purpose it is to be beautiful, Kennett set about restoring his appearance.

Makeup reapplied and perfume wafting just strongly enough to cover the scent of the sea, Kennett exited the carriage outside house Soga.

His jaw fell open.

The house had not weathered the storm well. A full tree collapsed on an annex, hedgerows torn up by the gale scattered across the winter-bare lawn. Doors torn off their hinges, windows shattered open.

In the center sat the ruined fountain. The four traditional elemental spirits looked little worse for wear, but the Empress's post was bare. Little pipes spat water at strange angles, while the fire-making device gurgled and sparked below. In the water of the fountain sat the shattered stones, some twirling slowly in the flow and others sunk to the bottom.

In the cold winter air the entire house felt *empty*. Like its heart had been pulled out and put in a private box somewhere in the darkness. No gardeners scurried among the plants, no carpenters hanging new doors. Aside from a guard posted at the main entrance and Kennett's own guard, not a single soul could be found.

"Azure Lord Kennett Cash—" the sound of great, hacking coughs from the building stopped Kennett. "Pardon. Azure Lord—" Again, the coughing stopped him. This time it ended in a long, drawn out splorting of someone inside blowing their nose with much enthusiasm.

"Is all well?" Kennett managed. The guard stared at him impassively.

"Well enough." The dry, crackling coughs from behind the guardsman implied otherwise. "His Lordship spent the evening battling the storm. He inhaled a great deal of smoke and arrived home thoroughly soaked. He's now laid up in bed while the rest of the household set about undoing the damage."

"I see. Best wishes to Lord Soga, and to his house. I hoped to procure an audience with Her Ladyship Amaya Soga?" Kennett rocked his weight from foot to foot, trying to keep his nerves under wraps.

"I'm afraid that's impossible, Lordship. The Ladies are not in residence at this time. I could ask the footmen to prepare tea, if you wish to wait for them?"

Kennett thought about it. It'd be an excellent excuse to be anywhere but home for a while. But looking at the shredded grounds, the shattered glass, the sad gurgling of the fountain, he couldn't bring himself to inconvenience these people any further. Besides, he'd no idea how long it would take them to return home and no interest in receiving a scolding from Irene about being out past dusk again.

"Thank you, no. I am pleased to hear that the ladies are safe and well. Kindly let Amaya know I look forward to seeing her again at her leisure." And Kennett turned to go. The fountain caught his eye again.

"Say, what did happen here?" It was odd that the Empress had disappeared but the remaining fixtures were more or less unharmed.

The guard shrugged. "We're not certain, Lordship. She was at her post when the family exited the home last evening. By the time they'd removed the floodwaters from the hospital, extinguished the flames at the school and broken down the first batch of fallen trees, the statue of the Empress was gone. S'pose she's been stolen, Lordship, but we've no hands to go hunting for gold when the people can't walk the streets."

Kennett nodded and turned back to the fountain. He leaned in close. By no means an expert in the crafting of such items, it was nevertheless obvious that whoever had stolen the

statue had planned to do so. The statue had been cleanly removed, leaving no breaks, cracks or bends in the metal and no leftover pieces of the Empress.

Someone waited for the opportunity to snatch this, and only this. A rebel, planning against the Empire? To take the perfect opportunity, deface a fountain, amass some money? What if they didn't wait for the opportunity? What if Irene was right, and the rebels called the storm?

What if the storm had only been a distraction?

Chapter Seven

Midwinter Feast

Kennett returned from his latest lesson with Ector to find the Cashell household buzzing with activity. Gardeners tended to the plants, cooks to the pantries, maids and butlers to the thorough cleaning of the new abode.

Kennett knew by the look on his mother's face what she was going to say.

"See to it that we are prepared for royal inspection. Fionnbara, his wife and a small assortment of guards and sailors will be arriving within the fortnight. We must be prepared for their arrival at any time." Irene scolded the servants. Then to her son "I trust Ynid is ready to host the young couple?"

"Of course she is prepared."

"Good. Then all is as it need be. Your brother is headed home! I've sent the servants to clean your quarters; there's an awful layer of dust on most. Now go make yourself presentable; you must look your best for our Midwinter Feast."

"As you wish, Mother." Kennett scampered up to his tower. The scraps of fabric left behind from his tinkering vanished, his own clothes hung in neat rows. Three maids paused just long enough to glower at him between their scrubbing. Kennett craved time to himself, to sit and sort through all that had happened.

The Soga clan left their own home to destruction. Someone knew that would be their action, someone who wanted the statue of the Empress. But the Sogas had sworn the storm a natural phenomenon, the type that came and went during the change of the seasons. Why? What did the ruling family of Mizurei have to hide?

A rapid knocking on the door stirred Kennett from his musings. Tossing on the nearest acceptable dinner robe he wafted as daintily as he was able down the stairs and into the formal dining room.

A dark, heavy wooden table sat at the far end of the room surrounded by plush velvet chairs set to gaze out upon the two long tables stretched out across the dining space. These were set in a blend of Soga red and gold layered with finery in the rich Cashell green. Above, a pre-Cataclysm chandelier twinkled rich amber light throughout the room. Across each of the four walls the elements raced. Behind the high table water and wind met, tumbling into mist and cloud before Kennett's eyes. And there, on the far end of the hall, hung the grand tapestry of the Empress. A staple of the Cashell household gifted to Kennett's Great-Grandmother, the jewels in her crown alone could fund an army for a year. Though the true expense came from the Weftweaving enchantments that set the stones to ever-sparkle, the flame to crackle warmth to fill a room, the crystal-pure water flowing from her fingertips, the gentle breeze wafting sweet perfume to the gathered attendees.

And her eyes. The Empress's eyes, subject of many an ode, wandered among the attendees. Partially hidden behind her raven-black hair, eyes of deepest brown, so dark they glimmered black. Every member of the Empire knew the characteristic fold of those eyes. And every member of the Empire yearned to earn those eyes on them—or to avoid their notice until their life came to a close.

Kennett nestled into his customary chair. Tobias and Daithi were already seated, the former sipping clumsily from his chalice in a futile attempt to stifle his nerves. Ynid lounged at the far end of the table, shrouded in the traditional black of a widow at a formal event. The somber effect completely ruined by the bright green she'd painted on her lips and eyelids.

Irene strode down the long carpet between the two tables. She revered low to the visage of the empress, her dress in viridian green and shimmering silver trailing a train like a long serpent behind her, twisting in an enchanted breeze.

Once she assumed her seat at the head of the table, the serving doors burst open on the sides and the raucous rabble descended into the dining room. Lowly servants, honored guardswomen and local craftsmen chatted and flirted, taking seats on the hard wooden benches. The merriment in the room thrummed through Kennett, who maintained a placid mask through sheer force of will.

With the hosts and commoners seated, five trumpets played.

“Announcing the honorable Ruby Lady Naviya Soga, the honorable Azure Lady Sakura Soga, and the honorable Ruby Lady Amaya Soga.” Called the servant.

Amaya floated effortlessly into the room and Kennett swiftly threw his fan between himself and her before breaking into delighted giggles.

He recognized the white collar, the black top—hugging Amaya’s curves perfectly, he had guessed her measurements to a tee—and the swirl of the deep ocean through the skirt as she walked. In the warm light of the chandelier, the gown sparkled softly as layer upon layer of fabric twirled in and out of view. The waves crested, rose and fell from the depths of the sea as Amaya crossed the room.

The trio of ranking ladies revered their host. Irene Cashell stood in front of the center chair and raised her arms to her guests. “We greet you, honorable ladies of the Soga Clan. I offer you the Oath of Hospitality. None in these walls shall seek to harm, insult or discredit you. So I speak, so it shall be. I am the Silver Lady Irene Cashell, welcome to the home of the Cashell Clan.”

After a beat, Naviya rose. Her long sleeves wafted the scent of fresh fruit into the air, a welcome addition to the midwinter air. “We accept your gracious offer, Silver Lady. We in turn offer our allegiance and obeisance, as commanded by Her Majesty, the Golden Radiance, the Empress. In Her name.”

“In Her name.” Came the reply, murmured by every lip in the room.

Almost every lip in the room. Sakura’s jaw was clenched tight. Spine straight and eyes unwavering on the nobles of the table, her distaste for the entire exercise written plain for all to see in her sneer.

“Then rise, and come to dine.” Irene politely ignored Sakura’s snub.

“Allow me to introduce you to my family. Here is my husband, Daithi.”

Kennett’s father bowed deeply to the ladies. “An honor for you to grace our halls. May this be the beginning of a long and rich alliance.”

“My middle son, Tobias.”

Tobias did his best to mirror his father, though the bow felt different coming from a young man with scruffy hair and black ink dots perched on the bridge of his nose.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Ladies of the Soga Clan.”

“My Aunt Ynid.”

“I am honored to be invited to this fine table.” Ynid revered perfectly. Snapping her fan open to cover her grin, she addressed Sakura. “It is always a pleasure to be brought to the doings of the main family, is it not?”

Before Sakura could answer, Irene spoke again.

“And I believe you are familiar with my youngest, Azure Lord Kennett Cashell.”

Spot which one she wants to marry off first. Kennett thought as he gave due reverence. “Your company brightens the room as always, Lady Amaya. I thank you for your company, Lady Soga. Let us enjoy our time together, Lady Sakura.”

He hadn’t practiced the words beforehand in the mirror. He hadn’t needed to; such hollow compliments became as thoughtless as using the correct dining fork for nobles.

“A pleasure to see you again, Lord Kennett.” Amaya’s voice, steady and rich, brought Kennett a genuine smile.

Kennett shoved down his delight, closed his fan and took her offered hand. “A pleasure to see you, Lady Amaya. I admit I had feared for you when the storm blew through.”

Empress, that smile would melt a miser’s heart.

“Indeed, I am quite well. And all the better for knowing that you thought to check upon me.”

“Now that we are all introduced, let us be seated.” Irene declared. As the Ladies settled in their appointed chairs, Irene tapped the foot of the tapestry.

The giant depiction of the Empress opened its mouth, and the unmistakable voice of the leader of civilized existence echoed in the hall.

“My people!”

A roar of enthusiasm greeted her. Several goblets got emptied on unsuspecting neighbors.

“Your greeting honors me. Today, we celebrate the end of darkness. The worst of winter is behind us, and the sun returns to us. Bask in its warmth, in the warmth of the Empire, and the year of success to follow. Eat, drink and be merry!”

The crowd whooped, hollered and pounded tables in approval. The nobles at the front table applauded politely. Except for Sakura, who sneered.

In the cacophony, rows of servants entered through the doors. Their dishes laden with heavy winter soups, fresh breads and mulled wine, each distributed along the tables. The

peoples populating houses Soga and Cashell feasted on the starting course. Distant cousins, honored guards and retired teachers nattered on in the two long tables. The high table sat reticent, each noble awaiting the opening tete-a-tete between Irene and Naviya. Their exchange, now that formalities were concluded, would define the tone of the evening. Was the night to be one of terse finger-pointing given the recent atrocities? Buzzy, filled with warm wine and good food? Richly diplomatic, discussing the finer points of trade and borders?

“You have been so gracious in accepting our invitation, Lady Soga. We hope the fare is to your liking; our cooks are trained in mainland cuisine.” Blades drawn, the dance began.

“We welcome your invitation, just as we welcome you to our home in Mizurei. I often find the mainland food to be a little heavy handed, I confess. Though your cooks do these dishes high credit.” Naviya Soga unsheathed her tongue, ready to do battle. Kennett sat forward in his chair, ears perked.

“Alas, such intense spices are the trial and triumph of living at the nexus of such an abundance of trade routes. Indeed, one must wonder how Mizurei has thrived so without such a steady influx. I suppose that is why you have such well-maintained Pre-Cataclysm paraphernalia; separated as you are from the bulk of the Empire.” A swift, low cut.

“Credit must be placed with the good people of Mizurei, who have loved and cherished it for generations. Their steadfast work, and my family’s guidance, have left us in quite an advantageous position. Perhaps one of our technicians might find the time to educate your staff in the ways and workings of our ‘paraphernalia’”. Naviya’s riposte, delivered with a gentle smile. Kennett hid his smile behind the fan. Always a pleasure to see someone challenge Irene successfully.

“Anything and everything that you are willing to share, we will most certainly add with pride to the Cashell Clan. Of course, I will have to ask you to refrain from sharing any anti-Empire sentiment.” Irene’s blow twisted around Naviya and landed squarely on Sakura, who opened her mouth to retort.

“Naturally. Being as far from the center of the Empire as we are, some members of my household—and some of the Mud and Ash within Mizurei itself—believe themselves too far for Her Majesty to be properly involved. I suppose you know what I mean; it must have taken, what, three weeks for your family to arrive safely? Goodness knows how long it would take a Clan less mighty than the Cashells!” Naviya deflected.

Irene wasn't deterred. “Fortunately, the winds travel swifter than any ship. Her Majesty is kept apprised of all goings on in the Cashell family holdings, both here and back on the mainland from my husband's family. I was surprised your own husband could not join us, Lady Soga. Duties to attend with the other household staff, I presume?”

Kennett could've sworn Naviya's smile vanished for a fraction of a second. Then her face went placid. “But of course. It is always good to know where Her Majesty's eyes are turned. As to my husband, I am afraid to report he has been much under the weather since the storm. As we wished the evening to be one free of coughing and spluttering, he is taking his respite in the quiet of the Soga Clan Estate.” Kennett thought of the horrible coughing fit he'd heard just after the storm and rolled his eyes at his mother's merciless nature.

“A shame we could not meet him. I wished to extend my deepest condolences, to him and to you, on the loss of your daughter. A shame these rebels have gotten so out of hand. But fear not, with the backing of Clan Cashell, and the imminent arrival of my eldest son Fionnbara I am certain that no further losses will be incurred.” Irene's teeth shone as her blades, going in for the kill.

“We are grateful for your assistance.” Naviya's voice shrank, as she did in her chair. Kennett winced; using the death of a child as a political lever may be tactically brilliant, but it struck him as unnecessarily cruel.

“How is young Lord Fionnbara? I hear his wife is not yet with child; or is my information out of date?” Sakura chimed in, shaking her shoulders like a bristling porcupine.

Irene's smirk did not waver. "My eldest son is serving the Empress and the Empire in the navy. Until such time as he is retired, would it not be unduly hasty for his wife to become with child? Elsewise who will train the babe in the ways of Clan Cashell?"

"And yet the child will not be of your clan, unless I'm much mistaken. The young bride has not forsaken her familial claims, correct? Alas that you bore no daughters, Lady Irene. I suppose the Cashell Clan must come to an end. As all great houses do before the glory of the Empire." The sarcasm dripped venomously from Sakura's lips, her eyes alight with malice.

"Such a shame, indeed. Though I am certain you are accustomed to such a struggle, as you neither bore children nor held the reigns of your house. I trust your brother's health concern is not critical? Perhaps he has simply been overdrawn by taking responsibilities that should rightfully have been yours, Lady Sakura." Irene didn't miss a beat, eyes locked on Sakura.

"Fortunately for us all, my sister-in-law is more than capable of leading House Soga to further greatness."

"Naturally. That is why Her Majesty has entrusted the future of Mizurei to Clan Cashell." Irene's voice betrayed her glee, her words piercing through to the heart of the Soga's weakness.

Naviya's smile graced her lips again. She took her fork and rang it against the edge of her glass until the room quieted. Once every footman and guardswoman had their eyes upon her, Naviya called out "A toast. To Mizurei, and to the Empire!" and a brilliant wisp of flame roared from her fingertips into the air causing many in the audience to gasp.

"To Mizurei, and to the Empire!" The room roared in response.

It was a masterful, if desperate, final parry Kennett thought. By deflecting to the good of the people, the woes of Naviya's house took a back seat. Indeed, when the chatter started up again it became about how to attract further trade to return to the island, as well as repairs from the storm damage. Tobias rambled on about where he saw room for improvement and the mood became significantly more relaxed.

Kennett let his thoughts wander, looking over the common folk of the town and the dignitaries of both houses. As the fish dish stank up the room, he wondered how much they understood of the duel taking place at the high table, as Naviya laid out the plans House Soga had for improving the economy and aid for those displaced by the recent storm and rebellion. Did they know that two completely different futures were battling it out in front of their eyes, victory determined less by wisdom or learning and more by social status and the ability to cautiously veil an insult?

As heavy meat and pies were brought out, Kennett puzzled over Irene's plans for the first time in his life. Of course she was efficient. Brutally so. All lands that she commanded held loyalty to the Empire core and did what was best for the causes the Empress set forth. Living in safety, the people labored, loved, lived and died often without ever seeing another holding. Now, Kennett thought on what those people—the Mud, the Ash—thought of their leader. Was Irene loved, as the Empress? Feared? Did they disagree when she told them what to plant, when she set the price of grain? Did it matter? After all, she was Silver—second only to the Empress herself. Kennett thought if Irene made an unpopular choice, surely it was because she knew what was good for them—even if they didn't know themselves. But what if—

"Kennett?" His name snapped him out of his reverie.

Amaya was standing before him, wrapped in the gown he had wildly crafted for her, offering an arm. Somehow, Kennett had lost himself in his musings all the way through to dessert. Before the families settled in for tea and a more private discussion, there was a chance for each guest to use the facilities, chat with someone who caught their eye, or...

"Did you wish to join me for a stroll? I fancy your gardens before we retire to the lounge."

"Of course, it would be my pleasure." And a welcome distraction from the thoughts now swirling over and over in his mind.

The hues of sunset shattered and broke across the gardens. Tiny herbs sat in full darkness, while great maple trees and cherry blossoms caught the hues of magenta. Between, the benches bathed in the last of the cold winter's light; spots of warm in the otherwise cold air.

Kennett trailed after Amaya, who ran her fingertips across the light-touched leaves stopped to inhale the sweet scent of the evergreens, and plucked a tiny bud of herb from the ground level. This she snapped in half and offered part to Kennett. Intrigued, he popped the little greenery into his mouth.

"How many gardeners does it take to maintain this place? These plants don't bloom here in winter." Amaya's question came as the taste of fresh spearmint cleansed Kennett's palate.

"We brought the traditional five with us. And most of the plants are from our garden back home. It was quite the challenge to get the Woodworkers to keep them alive for the whole sea journey. We're lucky that my family has such command of the water, or we could have sailed into a storm. Then not a single sprig would have survived the trip."

"Five gardeners." She slipped the leaf gently between her lips. "Is that the standard back on the mainland?"

Kennett blinked at Amaya. "Of course. All things are in fives; the four followers and their leader, just as the Empress is the leader of the four elements. To have less would be to either discard an element, or to neglect the role of leadership."

Amaya's face formed a soft pout. "How strange. To have five people doing work that could be done by one. There is no space for such largesse in Mizurei. My home has survived a long time by taking what we need and using what we must, leaving the rest to grow and thrive on its own. Do you miss the mainland?"

Kennett's heart felt as though someone worked a knitting needle, long and sharp, over and over into it. "Of course. It is—was—my home. I miss the greenery. It does not get as cold or stormy there, and the torches are lit every night. The fashion, the gossip—there was always

something to do, someone to spend time with. The way the sunlight hit off the edge of the coast—" Tears built up at the edge of Kennett's eyes and he forced himself to stop.

Amaya placed a hand on his and held it firmly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"You didn't. I just—Have you ever been away from here?"

Amaya shook her head.

"Well, I spent so much time on the water, learning from my brothers, my parents. Whenever I was on land, back home in the mainland—that was my time. My chance to do what I wished, to see my friends. I'd always—" Kennett's voice cracked. Forcing a breath, he carried on. "I'd always assumed that, some day, I would get the chance to settle in. To be home, not wandering off forever to the next horizon. And maybe I still will. But..."

"But it won't be the home you imagined." Amaya finished. Kennett looked up at her. Her body curled in on herself, blinking slowly. Lips in a miniature frown, and a single wrinkle prominent on her forehead. He couldn't tell what she was thinking about, just that it was something deep and heavy. "We grow up on stories of the mainland here, you know."

"You do?"

"Of course! How else are we supposed to feel connected to the empire? Mizurei has been mostly on its own for so long. Now you're here, and the Empire is involved. That changes everything."

“What do you mean?” Kennett’s heart spun around his home, his lips forming the words as a polite young man ought.

Amaya closed her eyes and took a slow, deep breath. Her perfume of jasmine and sandalwood blew through the air, gentle and rich. “Mizurei has been a port town here for almost 2,000 years. My family has been here through the Cataclysm, through the rise of the Empire. Most folk don’t remember the time before, the time when spirits and humans weren’t at war. Back when we worked together to weave the wonders of the First Age. My family; our line—we’re one of the last pieces still standing from that time. What we hold true, the lessons we’ve passed on...it’s all so different now that the Empire is on our doorstep.”

“I thought Mizurei was part of the Empire from the start.”

Amaya’s smile did not reach her eyes, and as she placed her hands folded in her lap she sighed. “Technically, yes. But we’ve always been more or less autonomous. We follow the rites and laws of the Empire. We pay our tribute, manage our trade according to the customs of humans. We keep spirits away from the mainland. But we ruled *ourselves*. When a storm hit, or pirates came raiding...when the winters rang bitter or the fish wouldn’t bite, Mizurei took care of its own. Just as we always have. And now...now...”

Kennett, emboldened by his own feelings, took her hand in his own. “Now you have me. You have us. You don’t have to do this alone anymore.”

Amaya turned to look him in the eyes. Eyes such a dark brown as to be almost black gazed into emerald green ones. For a moment—seconds or hours, it was impossible to tell—they sat there. Two of the most important children of the Empire, the leaders of the next generation.

Kennett traced his thumb across Amaya's palm. He resisted the urge to brush her dark hair out of her face. Her eyes, damp around the edges and quivering, held his steady. With a tiny hiccup, she cupped his face and forced a smile.

"You're wrong. I've never been more alone in my life."

Kennett made himself remain still. He fought every urge to recoil. *Was his company worth so little? Why were they even here, if being with him didn't help soothe her?*

"I have lost too much, Kennett. Two sisters. My freedom. The independence of my homeland." The tears falling from her were not the lovely, elegant tears of a dignified lady. Nor were they the gentle tears of a lover calling her beloved to her aid. These tears were heavy, wracking sobs. Water fell freely from her face, her shoulders raised to her ears, eyes forced shut. Her breath came unsteady and forced, and she withdrew her entire body into a tight, curled ball.

For seconds, Kennett sat and watched, unsure how to proceed. A great breach of tradition, for a woman to allow her suitor to see her weep. Indeed, on the mainland this would be tantamount to declaring she held no interest in him and requesting him to leave post-haste.

This wasn't the mainland.

Kennett wrapped his arms and their long sleeves around Amaya and pulled her into his chest. He kept his breathing slow, even. Amaya threw herself into his embrace and wept all the harder.

Holding her, Kennett felt his armor melt at her touch. While he had lost no kin, he had lost his home. The faces of the people he had left behind blurred and swam in his vision, until he, too, wept.

When the tears ran dry the sun had properly set, and the two held close in the darkness. The scents and sounds of evening gathered around them. Still they sat, holding each other close. In the growing dim, Amaya emerged from Kennett's arms.

"I—sh—shouldn't have—sorry." Amaya rearranged her hat and settled the dress back into the flowing ripples. "That was inappropriate. Please forgive my outburst." Her speech came slow and even, breaths still shaking her shoulders around the edges. Kennett felt the facade of the perfect daughter slip back over her. His gut twanged. *They were the same.*

"Of course. Your outburst is—" He stopped short. He had been about to claim it was forgotten, but that wasn't what he wanted. Here, in the garden and the nighttime, thousands of leagues from home, he'd felt loss. No, he'd let himself feel loss. Know what it was to have surrendered his past, who he could have been and the road he planned to walk.

Somehow, that she had cried, too, made him feel stronger. Safer. Like, for the first time, he wasn't alone on this dreary little island. Someone else knew what it was to be *Alone*.

Looking into her eyes, the whites shining dimly in the rising moonlight, Amaya reached her hands to his shoulders. The warmth of his body had not left her, and he returned to it with a grateful, quiet sigh. There were no tears this time, just the two of them snug together in the distant starlight. Kennett's head resting gently against her chest, warm and safe together.

"Don't apologize." Kennett found his voice again, whispering up to her ear. "I...I needed that. I haven't—not since we got the news that we were moving."

He felt Amaya nod. "The day she died. The last time, for me." She looked down and her eyes found his. "I want to tell you something. I need you to promise to let me finish, though,"

Kennett looked into her eyes. In general, people wanted eye contact for one of two things. Either to tell you an intense truth, or to cover a lie by making it look like an intense truth. He hoped—and wished, silently, to the Empress—that this was the first. Bracing himself for anything to come out of Amaya’s mouth, he nodded. “I promise.”

Amaya’s watery smile gave way to her truth. *Or her masterful deception.* “When I first asked you to dance at that ball, I thought you were a fop and a fool. I only approached you because you were my best chance—my only chance—at continuing the line of my family, keeping the rule of Mizurei part of the Soga clan. I figured you for an empty-headed puppet of your family, here to supplant us and solidify the grip of the Empire on my home. I underestimated you, didn’t think of you as a person. And now...” Her voice dropped from a murmur to a whisper, and she trailed her fingertips up Kennett’s pale cheek to his red hair, running her hands gently across his scalp. “I think I’m falling for you.”

Amaya leaned close, her face now mere inches from his. Dizzy from the confession, the crying, the moonlight, Kennett leaned in closer and—

Kisses come in many flavors. Intense, passionate kisses where lips meet and play, back and forth. Short, sweet kisses where lips connect and disconnect as partners in a dance, touching only briefly. Wild kisses of emotion, full of laughter or tears.

Then there are kisses like this one. Kisses of promise, of possibility and romance.

Their lips brushed barely, touching uncertainly. Tenderly the two held one another, tension flowing out of their bodies as they embraced one another. They lingered together, eyes closed. Amaya’s lips, soft and just a touch sticky, filled Kennett’s mind. Her perfume rolled over him afresh, jasmine and sandalwood filling his head with dizzy, warm thoughts. Twice, the kiss paused as Kennett’s breath hitched. The first time, Amaya waited for him to come to her. The second time she pressed down against him, the taste of the sweet fruits that colored her lips slipping into his mouth.

How long the two sat there, entwined in each other's embrace, neither knew. It wasn't until the sound of footsteps approached that Amaya released Kennett, and the two promptly returned to their formal, seated positions—Kennett snatched the hat from his head and trailed his fingers through his hair, smoothing it before their guest could see how much they had been touching.

"Lord Cashell. Lady Soga. Apologies for the interruption. Lady Sakura asked me to let you know the carriage is pulling around, as the after-dinner aperitif is complete." Linnea, the guardswoman eyed the pair up and down and let a smirk pierce her professional mask. "Your family expects you shortly. I shall let them know you two are saying your good-byes." She turned and left them to each other.

Amaya's smile looked nothing like her mother's practiced masterpiece. The blush forming on her cheeks matched the sheepish grin. "Thank you. I shall call on you—soon, I hope?"

Kennett smiled back comfortably. "And I shall be awaiting your call, My Lady." In a burst of inspiration, he broke tradition and kissed the back of her hand. He felt her knees shake as he did. "Good eve to you, Lady Soga."

"And to you, Lord Cashell." He watched her go. Halfway to the door she paused and threw a glance and smile back over her shoulder at him. When she saw him looking, she blushed all the harder and scurried away into the doorway.

Kennett held that last smile close to him as he dozed to sleep later that night, basking in the day's memories.

Chapter Eight

Eyes of the Empress

The house sat quiet on the dawn of the new year. Kennett rose without the usual greeting of birdsong, and without the hard rapping of servant knuckles on his door. The time between Midwinter and the new year demanded rest.

Dressed, combed and painted, Kennett waded gently into the dining hall. The servants there closed the end of breakfast up and put it away. "Pardon, have you seen Lady Irene?"

"I believe the rest of the household are about their daily tasks. The servants were told to let you rest, though I believe Lord Odili is awaiting your presence in the gardens. Is there anything I can get you, My Lord?" The servant gestured, his short sleeves leaving the gesture brisk and direct in a manner most unbecoming for a young man.

"I ate thoroughly last eve, thank you. Tea in the gardens is welcome at your earliest convenience." Kennett swept away from the table, through the long wooden hallways and back to the garden where he and Amaya shared a kiss in the starlight.

In the light of winter's sun the garden looked much different. The plants small and prickly, much like Ector Odili. His balding head and robust gut swiveled to Kennett as he approached.

"Ah, good. The events of the last week did not tire you so thoroughly that we could not connect. Come, sit. I've some of the finest Jasmine tea back from the mainland." In tiny, delicate motions Ector filled a cup, placed it on a miniature saucer and settled it in front of the open seat across from him.

Kennett lounged in the chair, enjoying his first tea of the day. The smell washed over him first, sweet petals shrouded in warmth. He felt the heat of the tea crush the weak cold of the day and settled more comfortably in the seat.

"Are we to resume our lessons, then?"

“A moment.” Ector’s eyes darted over Kennett’s shoulder, and his brown hand waved away the approaching servant. Once the man’s back had disappeared from view, Ector spoke again. “Whether or not we resume is up to you, as is the contents of our lessons going forward. It is time we had a thorough talk.” Ector’s pinkie finger lingered in the air even after he returned the cup to its saucer.

Uncertain how to respond to this, Kennett utilized the fallback of every noble at such an occasion. He dropped two lumps of sugar into his tea, clutched the teacup tightly, and stirred. The *tink, tink, tink* of his spoon prevented silence settling in. When he could no longer reasonably be stirring, Kennett took a long draught of his tea. Cup back on the table, Kennett found his words. “Of course. What topic may interest you today?” He was hoping it had nothing to do with Amaya. Whether it was her outburst in the woods or their intimate moment in the gardens, he had no interest in discussing either with his etiquette teacher.

Ector looked sternly at his pupil. “There are many things we must discuss, all of which will take some time. I have asked the servants not to disturb us, and now I will ask you to let me complete my explanation. Then, and only then, will I answer your questions. Do you agree to my terms?” Ector sipped.

What was it with people needing to monologue at him? With a sigh, Kennett nodded. “I agree.”

Ector breathed deep and began to speak.

“For many years, it has been my joy and honor to tutor you, Kennett Cashell. I have spent time ensuring you know the manners and rules of high society. Lectured on the ways a body may betray someone’s truth. You’ve learned to measure the quality of a fabric at ten paces, the veracity of a jewel at twenty, and the standing of a target at fifty. I am pleased to report that, as an Azure Lord, you now have all the information and skills you need to succeed.”

A long space followed this. Kennett searched Ector’s face for any hint of what was next. His teacher’s eyebrows knit together, the laugh lines around his eyes looking more like crow’s

feet. Whatever it was, Ector took it as seriously as his oath to House Cashell. After another breath—and a refill of both of their cups of tea—Ector continued.

“Of course, you are to be praised. You learned swiftly, studied thoroughly and managed yourself with great aplomb. Were we on the mainland, I would simply retire from being your instructor and let you about your life.” Another sip of tea, this one less delicate. “However, we are not on the mainland. We are in Mizurei, where the rebel sentiment grows and the nobles behave without decorum. I want you to serve the Empire, Kennett. I want you to join me in the work of espionage.”

This pronouncement spun in Kennett’s head. *Espionage? Ector was a spy? A spy that had been watching him since he could walk?* “Wha—How—Why?” the question ripped free of Kennett’s lips.

Ector resumed his practiced smile. “Because you are clever. Talented. Loyal to your family, to the Empire.” He handed Kennett his tea, and the two sat and sipped in silence a while.

“You jest, surely.” Kennett put his head back on his shoulders. Of course it was a joke—Tobias had probably put him up to it. Or Fionn, if he’d snuck a message back after the storm. Ector a spy? Laughable. The portly man, face covered in laughter lines, balding and grey hair. This man could not so much as dance a gavotte, never mind sneaking around The Empire’s enemies.

“I assure you I do not. Though I suppose, having known me so long, you may require some evidence.”

Kennett nodded.

Before his eyes, Ector Odili melted away. The laughter lines disappeared into a handkerchief. Underneath a skin-tone cap sprang short-cut black hair. A pair of oddly shaped pillows yanked free from the front and back of his shirt, leaving lean muscle behind. In mere seconds, the straps on the shirt were tightened, the shoulders sat high and even, and a completely different, much younger man sat before Kennett.

“Who—what—” Kennett stammered again.

Ector—or the man who had been masquerading as Ector—burst into rich, low laughter.

“I will answer all of your questions, Kennett. But first there is much to explain, and little enough time to explain it in. Come.”

With a wave, Ector conjured his student.

Wait.

With a flap of an arm that looked a lot like his old friend and mentor, this stranger tried to get Kennett to follow him.

Kennett’s heart beat fast. He was here, alone, with a spy. A man who could—and, given the long proximity, almost certainly did—know everything Kennett had ever done. A man so trusted that no one questioned him when he sent the family servants away.

“Scurry, young one!” his old schoolmaster scolded.

Except the voice was all wrong. The first bit too fast, the second too slow. The stranger limped a little on his left leg. The hairs on the back of Kennett’s neck stood up.

Then, he forced a slow breath and an easy smile.

“Of course, lead the way.” His hand directing the stranger to turn his back.

With a smile, ‘Ector’ took an enormous stride and turned his head at the very last second, three paces ahead of Kennett.

“Right. To the explanation. I am, indeed Ector Odili, Azure Lord of House Odili. But my rank does not come from being named to it by the queen. Instead, it is the mark of my status as spymaster.”

“At Azure?” Kennett quickened his pace, and the distance shortened.

Again, the stranger laughed. “It is the best position to be a spymaster. You see, if I wish to disappear amongst the ranks of high nobility, I do so. Though not so low that it is permissible to deny me an invitation. And for the common folk, I am near enough that we may grow friendly.”

The distance lengthened again as the spy moved swifter, departing the gardens for the woods beyond. “Or command them, should the need be urgent.”

“Curious. I would have thought her Majesty more inclined towards Silver and Rubies for her allies.” Again, Kennett sped his steps.

“Those of the uppermost echelons may include members of my organization. Though, if it did, I would note no one in a better position for moving between worlds than an Azure Lord.” Kennett could hear his smirk as he concluded “Particularly an unwed one.”

Kennett had fallen behind, though he wasn’t sure when. Now they wove between bare trees, their leaves crunching and frosted underfoot. *Wait.*

Kennett slowed his gait and lightened his step. “And those below?” As the traitor shifted behind a tree to the right, Kennett circled to the left.

“Have many uses, and certainly many of my organization amongst them.” With the back of ‘Ector’ towards him and the tree dividing them, Kennett lifted his right leg as though marching—and snatched the knife he kept in his boot to his palm. “If the Empress is to maintain her control throughout the breadth of the continent, then she will need eyes and ears elsewhere. While she is mighty, she still possesses but one mortal form. So we are the eyes and ears she needs throughout the Empire.” The man finished his turn about the tree, and Kennett lightened his steps. The dry leaves crunched under his feet, betraying his position. *Closer. If I can just get a little closer...*

“So the Empress works with many within your organization, then? And you are her servants? Kennett trailed behind his guide, blade tucked in his long flowing sleeves. His robes stirred the leaves behind him, his feet crunching along the frost-covered forest floor. How could he move closer without being detected?

“That is an apt description. With the recent uprisings, our work becomes increasingly critical. To thwart those that would upset the good order—” Ector stumbled over a root, buried by

the dead and dying things populating the earth beneath him. Seeing his chance, Kennett pounced.

The knife glinted in the gray winter light. At its tip, a single drop of blood trickled from the spy's chin down towards Kennett. He held his arms steady as a dancer poised to begin, eyes locked on the stranger's. Ector's face held impassive and inscrutable, staring down the blade that could slice his throat with a flick of Kennett's wrist.

"Well, well. It appears I've been outfoxed." The man's face broke into an enormous white smile. "So what will you do now?"

Kennett's mind raced as fast as his pulse. What was he going to do now? Alone, with his teacher in the woods. He had no proof of anything, nothing more than the words of his instructor.

"Th-There are rebels in these parts." Kennett cursed his stammering voice. "If they should happen upon an Azure Lord alone in the woods, who is to say what they might do to him?" His voice snapped back into place, echoing the cold vitriol of his mother.

The man laughed. Blade to his throat, death looming above him, he laughed. "Whilst I appreciate your enthusiasm, Kennett, too many people know who we are and where we have gone. Unless you intend to stab yourself repeatedly and risk the Fleshworkers trying to restore you, that tale will never pass. Think, lad. I taught you better than that."

"Irene will know what to do with you. Up." Kennett gestured with the blade of the knife, forcing 'Ector' to his feet.

His smile did not waver. "Ah, but that will require calling her back. Are you certain you can convince her, with neither evidence nor higher standing to accuse me from?"

He had a point, Kennett admitted. "Then I will take you to the Sogas. They will believe me, and they have jurisprudence to rule on you."

“That is so much farther than your own domicile and will include walking the streets of Mizurei. Do you truly think no one will stop you from walking me down the road at blade-point?” The man spoke slowly and plainly, as though relishing the words.

“I—” Kennett started. “The guardswomen, then.”

“Will still require you to successfully escort me to one of their stations, and I assure you I will not go quietly.”

Kennett fell silent. He had no better alternatives. If he could not harm the man, nor take him for any kind of assistance, then the momentary upper hand was irrelevant. In his deliberations, his grip loosened for a moment on the dagger.

‘Ector’ seized the opportunity. He snatched Kennett at the wrist, plucked the blade from his hand and shoved his student to the ground. Kennett fell with a hard *crunch*.

On the cold winter floor, Kennett found himself staring at his own blade, held by the man who had taught him from infancy, pointing squarely between his eyes. The smile seemed frozen on his mien, warmth and pride radiating from teacher to student held at knife-point.

I have done my best by Empress and Empire. Kennett thought and shut his eyes hard against the incoming pain his death would doubtless bring.

It didn’t come.

Instead, the sound of metal on leather filled the empty air. Nervous for what he might see, Kennett forced his eyes open.

Ector Odili stood with hand extended, waiting for Kennett to take it. The merriment in his eyes unmistakable “You pass. Well done.”

Kennett did not take the hand. “What do you mean?”

His teacher, blade sheathed somewhere on his person, sat squarely and looked directly into Kennett’s green eyes. “You. Pass. Welcome to the Endless Eyes.”

Kennett searched his instructor's face, his body for any clues as to what this game might be. His shoulders settled, smile lazily stretched, Ector leaned back against a nearby tree. He seemed genuine in his joy—though of course he would.

Sensing Kennett's hesitation, Ector pulled the knife back out from its sheath—or he must have, because he was offering it to Kennett. “Relax. You are in no danger and never were. If you are amenable, there are still things better shown than said.”

Baffled, Kennett took his dagger. He clutched it in his hand. “I don't understand.”

Ector's laugh echoed broad and deep throughout the quiet winter woods. “Of course you don't. Let me explain.” Kennett gestured with the blade, still pointed at the spy.

“Many, many years ago I, too, was brought into the woods by my teacher. She told me, as I have told you, of the existence of the Eyes. Being cautious, and trained as I was by her, I did my level best to subdue her. Just as you have done your best to subdue me. It is the mark of an expert in espionage. You trust nothing upon face value, Kennett. You realized the moment I revealed myself that I was not to be trusted. A person may claim anything they wish; so long as there is no evidence presented it does not matter. And you are correct; I am not to be trusted. I have duped you, and your family, for the better part of 20 years. Though, perhaps now you will permit me to demonstrate the evidence I *do* possess.”

Ector pulled a piece of parchment from within his robes and proffered it to Kennett.

Slowly, Kennett gloved his hands. When he was certain he would suffer no ill if the paper had been enchanted to burst into flame, he lifted it tenderly between two fingers.

The seal on the envelope was unmistakable. There, in pure gold, sat the Empress in her radiance. The crown of shattered stone swirled above her visage, and her robes trailed down and off the great throne she sat perfectly poised in.

Kennett memorized this seal as a child. Every child did. Said to be uncopyable, the mark of the Empress Herself emblazoned on this message. Carefully, Kennet slid a thumb under the

lip of the letter and cracked the seal open. Instantly, the seal melted to water and dripped off the envelope.

Kennett lifted the flap and pulled out the parchment inside.

“To Whom it May Concern,

This letter attests that Ector Odili, Azure Lord, services my direct employ. Where there is doubt to the letter of the law, he acts with my blessing. He may fulfill the role of arbiter, judge, and if necessary, executioner. Let it be known that he whose touch turns this parchment to blue-white flame speaks in my stead. His loyalty is beyond question, and should he be in need of reproach he shall receive it from myself personally.

The Empress.”

As Kennett read, the ink bubbled and swirled. It pooled into a puddle and slid off the page, leaving a blank piece of paper under it. Ector reached out a hand to take the letter. “I believe that will suffice.”

It dawned on Kennett that Ector had not read the contents inside. He couldn’t have, not if the text vanished upon consumption. *Which meant he had no way of knowing what the veracity check was.*

Lord Odili, impressive though he may be, worked through water in his castings. Kennett smirked and passed the letter to his old teacher.

Instantly, it roared to life as a great pillar of white heat. The edges of the fire burned a wild blue, like the lightning that split the heavens before the storm weeks earlier. Ector swore, threw the letter across the clearing and suckled at his singed fingers.

Fears banished, Kennett laughed. And laughed. “This whole charade has been worth it simply to see your face!” He doubled over, clutching his abdomen as the laughter consumed him. Out of breath, with tears building at the corners of his eyes, he finally straightened and looked at Ector. “Very well, Ector. The Empress Herself has vouched for you, so in Her Name I accept your explanation. But how, and why, did you come to be placed with my family?”

Ector scooped himself off the ground and offered again the hand to Kennett. This time, he took the pale brown palm and hoisted himself to his feet.

"I can, and will, answer an abundance of your questions. Alas, our time is short this day and there is much to discuss. Do you trust me enough, now that the Empress has vouched for me, that I may complete my explanation?" As he spoke he wove deeper and deeper into the woods, the few birds that had not fled further south croaking their winter tunes to the quiet air.

"Indeed. So speak, then." Kennett kept up to the best of his ability, though it seemed his teacher hid swiftness under a plump facade, and by the time Ector paused Kennett panted the frigid air.

"Excellent. Let us begin at the beginning; and I do hope you have been minding your studies. Tell me of the Cataclysm."

Suddenly a student again, Kennett rattled off the answer. "Over 700 years ago, the Spirits turned on humanity, apparently without cause. Volcanoes erupted, Oceans swallowed islands whole. Great winds tore down our walls, and the very ground consumed our legions, never to be seen again. Those who had once been our allies slew us by the thousands. We had no means of recourse, nor defense, against their great and terrible magics. Over a decade into this bitter struggle, The Empress gave us our greatest tools; the gifts of magic that we now wield through Manifestation. Our ancient heroes fought, bled and died. Where we could stake ourselves, there did the Empire set its borders against the Spirits, who hunt and kill us still."

"Very good, if a little rote. Shortly after the Cataclysm, as Her Majesty began settling in she quickly realized she would have need of ways to track all that happened within the Empire. Thus was our organization formed; to keep our eyes on the people. We watch for signs of Spirit activity, to spot and redirect defectors from the Empire." Ector paced slowly the small clearing they had landed in, eyes glued to the forest floor.

“And for 700 years we have succeeded. The Spirits stay outside our borders. The people’s needs are met, and dissidents are quieted.”

“Except the riots...” Kennett started. Ector neither ceased his pacing nor turned to look at his student, merely raising a hand to forestall him.

“And now, our duty is clear. There is organized activity here, Kennett. Someone—some Spirit—is working against us. They conjured a storm, ransacked my quarters. I cannot complete the tasks Her Majesty has set me alone.”

“What are we looking for?”

“Anything out of place.”

Ector flattened himself onto the ground and began crawling on his hands and knees. “Whatever birthed that storm did it here. And where there’s magic...” His hand thrust swiftly into a cluster of leaves and flew into the air clutching a tiny object “There is a medium for it to work through.”

In triumph, Ector leapt to his feet. It was strange, to see his old, plump teacher move so swiftly. But he was neither so old nor so plump now that he had shed his disguise. He had always moved with the grace of a dancer, now Kennett recognized it as the gentle touch and swift responses of a master in espionage.

“How do you know it wasn’t someone like my father, who can conjure a storm from the air itself?” Kennett closed in, eyes glued on the tiny object. A pearl no larger than the nail on his pinkie twinkled and shimmered in Ector’s hands.

“I did not know. I merely suspected. The most probable answer is a mage, Alabaster or perhaps even Mud, performed this feat. They would need a focus. Lesson one: Start with the likeliest answer, then work your way down. Most matters are precisely what they appear on the surface.”

“So if you had not found that...” The pearl was so small, Kennett doubted he could have uncovered it with weeks of searching, let alone the mere minutes it took Lord Odili.

“Then I would consider less likely possibilities, including it being a member of the household I came to serve, until I had explored every avenue so thoroughly that my only options were to begin again from the start or to assume a possibility so slim I had neglected it was, in fact, the truth.” Ector tucked the pearl into his robes. “Fortunately, this solution was simple as it appeared.”

Kennett took several paces back and observed the entirety of the scene. Ector Odili, Azure Lord, spymaster, on his hands and knees crawling through the dead leaves and insects that pepper the forest floor in the depths of winter, finding the miniscule clue that might prove the downfall of the rebellion.

He chuckled. *Power is no guarantee of appearance.*

“Now what do you do, since you have found this stone?”

“I have my own contacts. Perhaps one of them will be able to link it to the caster. But that is not your concern. Indeed, your concern is a simple choice.” Suddenly, Ector’s nose was inches from Kennett’s eyes. “I have revealed my existence to you, and so you must make the decision now. Are you loyal to the Empire, Kennett? Will you give of yourself, of your life, your will, your own glory, to serve the Empress? Will you join me in my mission to root out the causes of the uprising, to quash the dissidents? Or would you prefer to forget this incident ever occurred, and to go on as though we are once again Etiquette Teacher and Student? Choose, now.”

Kennett swallowed. Ector’s brown eyes held his gaze steady, leaving him no solace in the trees. A bitter wind blew through the clearing making Kennett’s teeth chatter.

Slowly, his conscious brain caught up to Ector's declaration. He still had a choice to make. Did he wish to dedicate his life, his existence, to the Empire?

He knew the right answer. He'd been raised to it his whole life. If the Empress calls, you serve.

But a piece of him nibbled away at his conscience. Did he really wish to spend his life chasing what was best for the empire? What of his own wants, his own desires? Could he be wed? What about his Manifestation, and his ties to the family? Could he return home, back to the Empire? Or would he be stationed in Mizurei forever, the guardian of this drab, half-ruined island for all his days?

Questions bellyflopping one over the other, Kennett got as far as "What about--"

"I'm afraid you have all the information I can provide. You must choose; to tell you more would be to make the choice for you. I sincerely hope to avoid that. Come along, Kennett. Give me your answer." Ector's perfume washed over Kennett, the mingled scents of patchouli and rich tea bringing Kennett back to reality.

Naturally, he cannot speak further. If he gave me the rules, I could use them to deduce others who are members of his network. The only thing to do now is to make the choice.

"Then, if I must declare myself, I declare myself loyal. As youngest member of the Cashell Clan, I am honored to accept your designation into the organization of the Empress's Eye. In Her Name!" Kennett dove into a deep reverence, eyes open. He felt his spine tingle, his heart beat out-of-rhythm.

Ector's teeth shone bright white. He threw open his arms and embraced Kennett.

"Welcome, then. By the rights of the Empress and my standing as Azure Lord of the Empress's Eye, I welcome you. You have made the right choice, Kennett. Let us return to our tea, we have much to celebrate!"

Together they strode back through the woods to the table and chairs, where a fresh pot of tea steamed in the chilled air. As they walked, Kennett drove question after question at Ector.

How long had Ector been a member of the Eye?

Far longer than he had been settled with this family.

What were the requirements for being a member of the Eye?

Primarily, to keep one's eyes and ears open and one's mouth firmly shut. Do not speak of the plans of the Empress, simply carry them out.

What limitations did this place on Kennett?

He could still marry, sire children. He must be loyal to the Empire. In many ways it's the same as being a lord, except his tasks would come from The Empress and her spy network themselves, instead of being filtered through the tiers on the way to him.

As the pair swished into their respective seats, Kennett asked the question he had been most concerned about from the beginning.

"Ector, why were you placed with the Cashells?"

Ector passed a scorching mug of tea to Kennett, then scrunched his lips as though considering his answer. "I have often wondered the same thing myself. Your mother, Irene, has been loyal all her life. As was her mother before her. Having never received either an acknowledgment from her that she knows precisely what I am, nor fully gained her trust enough to tell her directly, I am not certain she even understands what I am. All I know for certain is that the Empress placed me with the Silver Lady Irene Cashell, and bade me to raise her children to be loyal and talented.

You, Kennett, are loyal and talented. You stand by your family, even when your own wishes might call you elsewhere. Seldom have I instructed another so adept at understanding the facades of the nobility, or so sharp-eyed in the weaknesses of his foes. You are an astonishing agent of the Empire already, and with a little more time and dedication—who knows, maybe someday you will save the Empire itself?" Ector chortled, then he sipped his tea and raised an eyebrow to something behind Kennett.

“Where have you been!? The servants said you were not to be disturbed; as though I am not Lady of the House.” Irene swanned in, shoulders high, face locked in a scowl. “There is business to attend to, and Fionnbara is due in before the morrows sunset. We have preparations to make. Come!”

Without so much as waiting for a reply, Irene twirled on her heel, her petticoats whirling in the air, and swanned back into the house.

Kennett looked briefly at Ector, who made a lightning-swift wink. Then the teacher, padding back in place and eyes once again draped in wrinkles, gestured with his aged, calloused hand for Kennett to follow his mother.

“We will continue our lessons after your preparations are complete. On the overmorrow, then.”

Kennett bowed hastily, his robes askew. He fumbled out of the chair, upset his half-full teacup, and scampered into the house after his mother.

Throughout the evening, as he cleaned and polished the home, repaired his best clothes and made space for Fionn at the table, Kennett found himself smiling.

He had a secret. He had been chosen, chosen by the Empress, for a purpose.

And now he would do whatever it takes to make the Empire proud.