

The tea had gone cold twenty minutes ago, but neither of them moved to refresh it.

Mirin sat across from him in the chair she'd claimed as a child—back when her feet couldn't reach the floor and she'd swing them while reciting her lessons. Now those feet were planted firmly on the stone, though her fingers still worried at the embroidered edge of her sleeve the way they always had when she was thinking too hard.

He catalogued these details with the same precision he catalogued everything: the slight tremor in her left hand, the way she'd positioned herself with clear sightline to the door, how she'd chosen the seat that would force him to turn his back to the window. Smart girl. He'd taught her well.

Perhaps too well.

"The reconstruction efforts in the lower districts are proceeding ahead of schedule," she said finally, her voice steady in that careful way he recognized. The voice of someone walking across ice, testing each step. "The families we relocated have settled into their new quarters."

"Have they." Not a question. He let the silence stretch, counting her breaths. Seven. Eight. On the ninth, she'd break.

"Uncle." There it was. "The archives in the old district—"

"Were water-damaged beyond salvation. A tragedy." He lifted his own cup, noting how her eyes tracked the movement. "Though perhaps fortunate, given the delicate nature of some records stored there. The previous administrator was... less careful with documentation than we might prefer."

Her fingers stilled on her sleeve. "The previous administrator. Lord Ketran."

"You would have been six when he passed. A fever, I believe."

"The same fever that took his whole household staff." Her voice had found its footing now, each word placed with deliberate care. "And his personal guard. And the archivists who worked that wing. Very specific in its targets, that fever."

He set down his cup with a soft click against the saucer. Outside, someone was singing in the courtyard—one of the kitchen girls, voice bright with the careless joy of someone who'd never had to weigh the cost of a single life against a thousand.

"Mirin." He spoke her name the way he'd said it when she was small, when she'd come to him with scraped knees or difficult questions. "What is it you think you found?"

She reached into her satchel—slowly, telegraphing the movement—and withdrew a leather journal. Water-stained, yes, but legible enough. He recognized Ketran's cramped handwriting even from across the desk.

"Names," she said. "Dates. Transfer orders for people who were listed as fever victims three days later. Your seal on the orders."

The singing in the courtyard stopped. In the silence, he could hear the whisper of wind through the tower, the distant sound of construction from the lower districts. Building the future on the bones of the past, as they always had.

"That district was a disease waiting to happen," he said, watching her face. "Overcrowded. Dangerous. The gangs had moved in, were recruiting children as young as ten. The fever—"

"There was no fever."

Four words, spoken with the quiet certainty of someone who'd done their research. His clever, careful girl, who'd learned too well the lessons he'd taught about verifying sources, about looking beneath the surface of things.

He leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers. "No. There was no fever."

The admission hung between them like a blade.

"Two hundred and thirty-seven people." Her voice cracked slightly on the number. "Including forty-three children."

"Including forty-three children who were being trained as poisoners and cutthroats. Who would have grown up to perpetuate the very system that was bleeding that district dry." He kept his tone conversational, as if they were discussing tax rates or grain distribution. "Do you know what Ketran was building down there?"

"I know what you say he was building."

"Careful." The word came out sharper than he'd intended, and he saw her flinch. Softer, then: "What I say is what the historical record will show. What the people need to believe to sleep safely in their beds."

She looked down at the journal in her hands, and for a moment he saw her as she'd been at seven, eight, nine—bringing him every injured bird, every problem, every injustice she encountered, trusting absolutely that Uncle would make it right.

"The children in the lower districts now," she said slowly. "They're safe. Fed. Educated. Because you built something better where that festering wound used to be."

"Yes."

"And the cost was two hundred and thirty-seven lives."

"The cost of leaving it to fester would have been thousands. Ketran was days away from open revolt. The violence would have spread through every district. The empire would have—"

"I know." She closed her eyes. "I ran the numbers. I saw the supply requisitions, the weapon caches. I know what you prevented."

The wind picked up outside, rattling the windows in their frames. Somewhere below, the kitchen girl resumed her song—a different tune now, one of the old ballads about sacrifice and duty.

"Then you know," he said quietly, "why I did what needed doing. Why I will always do what needs doing, no matter the cost to my soul."

She opened her eyes, and the look in them made something ancient and tired shift in his chest. "I know why you think you need to carry this alone. Why you've appointed yourself the empire's sin-eater, taking on every necessary evil so the rest of us can stay clean."

"Someone must."

"Must they?" She leaned forward, and for the first time since she'd walked in, she looked like the child he'd raised rather than the threat he'd assessed. "Or is that just what you tell yourself because you've been doing it so long you can't imagine another way?"

He could end this conversation with a word. Could invoke protocol, rank, the simple weight of decades of authority. Could remind her that the very safety that allowed her to sit here questioning him was bought with decisions like Ketran's elimination.

Instead, he asked, "What would you have done?"

The question seemed to surprise her. "I... I don't know."

"No. You don't." He picked up his cold tea again, finding comfort in the familiar weight of the cup. "But one day you will. One day, the weight of empire will rest on your shoulders, and you'll hold the lives of millions in your hands, and you'll have to choose. Not between good and evil—those choices are easy. Between evil and evil. Between the blood on your hands and the blood on your conscience."

"You're not that old," she said, but there was something hollow in the attempted levity.

"Old enough." He studied her face, seeing his brother's eyes, his mother's stubborn chin. "Old enough to have made that choice so many times that yes, perhaps I can no longer imagine another way. Perhaps that's precisely why the empire needs someone who can."

Understanding dawned in her eyes, followed quickly by something that might have been panic. "Uncle—"

"Keep the journal," he said, rising from his chair with the careful movements of someone whose bones remembered every hard choice. "Add it to the official archives when you feel the time is right. Let history judge whether the fever was kinder than the truth."

She stood as well, clutching the journal to her chest. "You're not— I'm not ready—"

"No one ever is." He moved to the window, looking down at the courtyard where that kitchen girl was still singing, oblivious to the weight of conversation above her head. "But you're already asking the right questions. Dangerous questions. The kind that might, perhaps, lead to better answers than the ones I found."

"Or they might just lead to more blood." Her reflection appeared beside his in the glass, younger, uncertain, but with steel beneath the doubt.

"Yes," he agreed. "They might."

The song below reached its crescendo—something about a hero who saved the kingdom but never came home. He'd always hated that song, the way it romanticized necessary sacrifice. But the people needed their ballads, their simple stories of good and evil, their heroes and villains clearly marked.

"I won't be another you," Mirin said quietly.

He smiled then, the expression feeling strange on his face. "Good. The empire has had enough of me."

She left eventually, the journal tucked back in her satchel, her steps slower than when she'd arrived. He remained at the window, watching the shadows lengthen across the courtyard, thinking about fever and fire and the terrible arithmetic of empire.

Tonight, he would review the intelligence reports from the border provinces, would make note of which regional lords were growing too ambitious, which trade routes were becoming too vital to remain in private hands. Tomorrow, he would issue orders that would reshape a dozen lives, a hundred, a thousand. Some would call them evil. Some would call them necessary.

He would call them nothing at all, because the moment you started naming your sins, you started trying to justify them.

The kitchen girl finished her song and headed inside, probably to help with the evening meal. Safe in her ignorance, free to sing about heroes and villains as if the world were that simple. As if anyone who'd held power for more than a heartbeat hadn't learned that you could either be good or you could be effective, but the luxury of being both was reserved for those who would never truly be tested.

Let Mirin believe she could find a better way. Let her hold onto that hope as long as possible. He would carry the weight a little longer, add a few more necessary evils to his tally. And when the time came—when she finally understood that the empire was not built on justice but on the awful mathematics of lesser evils—he would already be buried beneath his sins, one more fever victim in the historical record.

But perhaps, if he'd taught her well enough, she'd find a way to build something better on his bones.

The tea had long since gone cold. He drank it anyway.