CHAPTER 1: KITTI

Before the Empire knew my name, I never questioned where I belonged.

I stand by my mother's gravestone in the backyard of our three-room cottage, replacing the wilted flowers in her vase with fresh Orysian lilies. Her favourites are scarlet red, their blossoms dangling gracefully from long stems. Has it really been over ten years?

I try to remember her—rich brown skin, a heart-shaped face, and thick, long black hair that I envied. It's hard now. I mostly remember her later days when she was frail, skin pale like mine, but that was where the resemblance started and ended.

"Kitti." I turn to see Father standing beneath the open archway. I hate the grey streaks in his dark hair and beard. They make him look old. But he's still lean and muscular, built like the retired soldier he is. There's a certain discipline in how he grooms himself and the way he stands now, wearing a formal navy vest over a tunic and form-fitting trousers. Very Dravarian.

He used to scold me for mourning the dead for too long. Said everybody dies eventually. Great words to tell a grieving eight-year-old. But my father's always been like that—trying to keep everyone else steady even when he was grieving himself. He still thinks he's a commander sometimes.

"I'm just changing the flowers," I say.

His eyes soften for a moment, then it's gone as he nods and notices my clothing. " You're off to train?"

I flash him a grin.

"Leo has to pay his respects to Mabel's family today," he continues, "so I'll be going with him, then there's a council meeting in the evening. Come back early and make dinner for everyone. Clara's hosting tonight, so bring it to her house when you're done. And leave something for your brother."

"Another council meeting? What for?"

"We have a visitor from the mainland. Some matters to discuss."

He doesn't elaborate. I consider asking, but my attention is already drifting towards the freshly waxed bow and quiver waiting on the kitchen counter. Jun found a new rabbit den down by the cliffs, and we're meant to go after practice in the late afternoon. I sigh.

Leo comes down from the second floor before Father can respond. He’s dressed in his best formal dravarian-style clothes: a fitted red tunic with a high collar, structured shoulders, and gold embroidery, held closed by looped fastenings and a leather belt. His off-white sleeves gather into red cuffs, while dark trousers will tuck into polished leather boots.

It’s in the style of the mainland. Most boys his age live in loose linen and sandals unless the church or somebody’s parents force them into something respectable. That’s more or less what I’m wearing now, since I’d planned to spend the day in the square.

"Out to see about a girl?" I say with a smirk. "Oh Mabel, my love!"

He rolls his eyes at me. The girls tell me he's handsome, but even with his ebony hair slicked back, all I see is Mother's son. Sun-kissed skin, bright eyes, and sharp features. He's a product of a Dravarian man and an Orysian woman. Four years my senior, though he doesn't act like it.

"Keep running your mouth and I'll tell the boys how nasty you really are," Leo shoots back. Father catches Leo by the shoulders and turns his son to face him. "Oh, come on, she's not some prissy," he complains.

"She's your sister," Father says firmly. I'm smug behind his back. It pays to be the favourite. "Be. Nice."

I make a mental note to congratulate Mabel when I see her next. We're going to be sisters-in-law very soon.

Leo suddenly looks nervous and fixes his high collar, which doesn't need fixing. "How do I look? If all goes well I get her parents' blessing, then the church's blessing. You know how it goes. Even if Mabel has agreed, that's the tradition." Nervousness is a rare emotion in my brother. I pat him on the back. He recoils like he's just been splashed with mud. "Hands off! I just had this treated."

I grin. I love that we're almost the same height. I'm a few inches short of six feet, so Leo can glare at me almost eye to eye as he shrugs off my hand.

"That's enough, you two," Father says. "Now let’s get going, Leo. We can’t be late."

He shoos me away, and the two of them pull on their black leather boots and head out. They stroll down the narrow path, winding past the whitewashed cottages clustered along the hillside. Leo turns briefly to look at me, so I make an obscene gesture with my hand. He scowls and returns it without breaking stride.

Red clay roofs descend towards the harbour, broken by citrus trees and flowering vines, with the blue-green sea glittering beyond. On clear mornings, I can see the neighbouring islands in the distance rising from the water, all rocky cliffs and little villages much like ours. Travellers oftentimes call Orysia beautiful, but I have no comparison. When you've stared at the same sea and white houses your entire life, it just looks like home.

Weddings are one of the few things worth getting excited about. People come in from the other islands, the whole village comes alive, and everyone has an excuse to drink and dance.

I don't mind the excitement. After all, this time next year I'll be an aunt.

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By midmorning, I reach the training square overlooking the sea. Only a handful of boys are practising or watching; with the spring waters good for sailing, most of the men have taken their sons out.

I recognize Jun's dark mop of hair immediately, and a few others—runty Rex with his toothy grin, sly Sepi, who's resting his chin on his hands atop the hilt of his sword, and big Brutus in a loose vest that shows off his large frame and thick arms.

Two of the older boys around are sparring in the middle of the square. They're the seniors running today's training. Jun waves me over, and I slide into the spot beside him on the wall, crossing my legs.

"Who do you wager's going to win?" he asks.

Sepi snorts in front of us and tosses a look over his shoulder. "Isn't it obvious? You think Princess here can tell? Can't swordfight for the life of her."

Sepi mocks me with that nickname for years. Apparently, all the times I've knocked him into the dirt haven't convinced him otherwise.

Jun chuckles. "If I recall, she beat you up pretty good last week—"

"I said *swordfighting.* Princess here has no honor."

"You're just mad I got you good in your blind spot, Sepi. I thought you were over it." I grin as his face turns red. "Don't worry, I still haven't beaten Brutus yet." I've come close though.

At the mention of his name, Brutus turns with wide, expressive eyes. "You're too little," he says. “You'll need to be my size to take me down!"

I laugh at this. He’s freakishly tall for our age. I might’ve mistaken him for one of those half giants if I didn’t know better.

Rex, smallest of our age group, chimes in. "You know what's also pretty big? Your mother's—"

Jun tosses a wooden sword at him before he can finish the sentence. "Get on with it, Rex. We're up!"

I hear a chorus of giggles off to the side, where a group of girls has come to watch. One of them catches Rex's eye and flashes him a smile. He missteps, and Jun immediately takes advantage, sweeping in with a powerful overhead strike that sends Rex stumbling to the ground.

“Son of a whor—” Rex curses, clutching his shoulder as the crowd erupts in laughter. The girls whisper among themselves, and a few wave at Jun. He waves back. My chest tightens for a moment, but I ignore it. Jun has always been popular.

On occasion, other girls join us for these weekly training sessions, some to train, most to watch, but I'm the only regular. I'm not friends with the group of girls here today, though they probably know of me. Everybody does.

"Up for a match?" Sepi asks as he jumps onto the stone wall beside me.

"Nah," I say.

"Prissy."

"Bigger balls than you, don't worry."

"Well, you'll have to show me to compare, Princess." He smirks, looking entirely too pleased with himself for being an idiot. "Besides, heard the Empire's preparing for war with Khayal. Better practice more if we get drafted."

I raise an eyebrow. "Since when?"

"Ask my uncle. Says they've spotted Dravarian soldiers crawling around the island ports."

"Your uncle says a lot of things."

Sepi shrugs, but before I can question him further, one of the older boys calls him over for a match. He glances back at me briefly before entering the ring.

War with Khayal? That's news to me. Then again, someone's always claiming the Empire is about to invade somewhere, and I have more important things to worry about.

For example, Sepi’s sour, but he’s right about needing practice. Swords don’t listen to me. Spears, bows and smaller weapons come more naturally—anything that lets me keep my distance.

Father told me to train more as a kid. *Talent is out of one’s control, but skills can be honed,* he said. Leo then offered to help me “train” and left me covered in bruises. Maybe I avoid swords because he’s better with a long blade, and I’m better at everything else.

By the time Jun takes Sepi's place beside me, he's defeated a few more opponents. Jun leans against the wall, elbows resting atop it. I toss him my waterskin, and he gulps from it ferociously. I watch his Adam's apple bob and a sweatdrop run down his chin. When he finishes, he runs his tongue over his lips.

"What were you two chatting about?" Jun asks casually, his dark eyes fixed on the match. I try to gauge his expression, but I can't tell whether he's actually interested.

"Nothing important. Just some private jokes." I shrug. "You know how he is."

His eyes flick towards me, and I know I'm no different from the girls giggling in the corner and enjoying attention. Jun closes the waterskin, his fingers tightening around it.

"Are you planning to have a match today?" he asks. "Or just here to watch the boys?"

I snort. "Watch the boys, of course." He smiles.

"Kitti!" a voice booms. "Join me for a round!"

Brutus is holding up a training spear. I consider it for a moment. He's towering and full of muscle, the perfect challenge. The other boys are watching my reaction too. I have a reputation to maintain.

I extend my hand to catch the weapon he tosses. Longer reach, easier to fight with. He knows my preference well.

I wrap my braid tightly around my head. One time, Sepi yanked it as I spun for an attack, resulting in a break of my win streak. I haven't forgotten that lesson.

Brutus and I step into the centre of the square. It’s my first match of the day, and he’s fought at least three since I arrived. I might actually have a chance. He raises his longsword and shield. I lower my spear. A shield would only slow me down.

He parries my first thrust and catches the next on his shield. I feint high and sweep low, catching him behind the knee. His shield dips, but before I can follow through, his sword clips my upper arm.

I back off, shaking out the sting. Brutus charges and knocks my spear up with his shield. I twist away from the point of his sword, but he's already inside my reach. The edge catches me across the stomach, and I drop to one knee. If that blade were steel, I'd be bleeding.

The first round is his.

I hate fighting this close. My spear keeps him at a distance, but once he gets past the tip, his sword and shield make it hard to recover.

Except now he's tossing his shield aside.

I narrow my eyes. Oh, that bastard. A few spectators laugh as Brutus rolls his shoulders, entirely too confident.

We begin again. I keep my distance, thrusting towards his shoulder. He presses forward, forcing me to retreat. I strike again—high, low, high—but he catches my last thrust with his sword and shoves my spear aside.

Then my heel catches against something solid.

Shit.

The low stone wall is right behind me. I jump onto it, sending a few boys scrambling. I thrust down, but he knocks my spear aside with his bare hand, just below the blunted tip. I twist it back and swing the butt towards his head. Surprise flashes across his face.

My spear clatters to the ground as Brutus grabs me around the waist and hauls me over his shoulder like a sack of flour. I clutch the back of his shirt and drive my elbow into the back of his neck as hard as I can.

He cries out, his grip tightening around my legs. He stumbles, and suddenly I'm falling.

I throw out my left arm to catch myself as I hit the dirt with his full weight on me. The impact knocks the breath from my lungs, and pain tears through my shoulder. I curl around my injured arm, gasping as shouts erupt.

Jun drops to his knees beside me, his voice steady.

"Look at me," he says. "Breathe."

I can't answer. He examines my shoulder, then asks me to move my fingers.

"It's dislocated."

I clutch his shirt with my good hand and grit my teeth as he supports my arm, slowly working it back into place. Every movement sends pain surging through me.

Then something shifts with a sickening clunk.

I cry out, my whole body going rigid. The agony eases into a deep, throbbing ache, and I sink back against the dirt, drawing a ragged breath. Jun keeps my arm supported.

For a moment, all I can do is stare at the sky. Not this again. Then Brutus crouches beside him, his face concerned.

My blood boils. *What the fuck was that?*

I know he hadn't meant to drop me on my bad shoulder. I'd felt him stumble when I elbowed him. But I can still feel that awful moment when I knew I couldn't stop the fall.

I grab his shirt with my good hand, yank him towards me, then let go and slam my good fist into his face. Brutus stumbles backwards, blinking. I scramble up after him. The older boys get between us and I'm hauled back. Somewhere, Rex is shouting for us to fight.

Brutus is furious. I glare back, my shoulder throbbing.

I'm not angry that he won. I've lost plenty of matches to him. But that hurt like hell, and I'm sure as hell not apologizing for hitting back.

—

Preparing dinner for the council takes twice as long with one good arm. By early evening, I've managed a large pot of stew and set aside a portion for Leo, who'd better appreciate that I still fed him after busting up my shoulder. Jun gave me medication to numb the pain.

I hitch up the wagon and donkey to head over to Clara's house. Despite the pain, my mood improves. I like listening to the village council discuss serious matters. Whenever traders visit, I always linger and eavesdrop longer than I should, too. Their stories of seith and nobles and wars make our village feel very small, but my imagination infinite.

The merchant's wife, Clara, welcomes me with a relieved smile. She's plump and motherly with short, curly dark hair. I like her. She ushers me and her second son inside. He's a few years younger than me and follows us up the stairs with the large pot of stew I brought.

My father sits with fifteen other men, one of whom I don't recognize. They're gathered around a long table in the upstairs hall. There's nothing grand about the room. It's a functional space used for simple gatherings. Wood floors, wood walls, and serious talk. Everyone's dressed rather formally. I hadn't given much thought to the occasion.

Father acknowledges me with a nod but doesn't smile. Like the others around the table, his arms are folded and his brow furrowed in thought. Whatever they've been discussing has clearly stalled. I plant a quick kiss on his cheek, and he smiles briefly.

"Ah, Kitti," a round-faced man at the table grins as I approach. He's Clara's husband.

Similar greetings echo around the table as Clara and her son serve bowls of my stew and fresh bread. Everyone knows the chieftain's daughter.

"You look troubled," I say quietly as I set a bowl before my father.

He only sighs.

I study the room for a moment. The stranger sits near the other end of the table, dressed too finely to be Orysian. He wears a fitted burnt-orange tailcoat over a lighter tunic, the fabric and tailoring far too expensive for anyone from the village. Very Dravarian.

I can't help but feel a little proud seeing my father seated among all the councilmen as an equal. A far cry from the mainlander he used to be.

"There have been Dravarian soldiers reported in the island region," my father explains to me sombrely. "We're discussing what this means for us."

My eyes dart to the stranger at the other end of the table. He's well-groomed and rather pale, dabbing his forehead with a handkerchief, strands of blond hair plastered to his brow. The weather must be warmer and more humid than he's used to, not surprising with all those layers. He catches me staring and offers a polite smile. I look away.

"Lord Ebroin Marcellus arrived from the mainland two days ago," Father adds, noting my glance. Nothing escapes him. "He's heard troubling rumours there and is sharing his knowledge with us."

Apparently, this isn't just another wealthy Dravarian escaping to the islands for a few weeks. My stomach sinks. Leo's wedding is just two months away.

The vineyard farmer grunts. "We can prepare arms and fight them off if they come upon our shores. My boys are old enough to use their swords!" His sons are twelve and fourteen. I've sparred with them myself. They're terrible.

Clara frowns as she sets a loaf on the table for the dravarian lord. "And risk all our children going to war? The Empire is ruthless even against its own colonies in wartime. I lost two brothers to the last empire-wide draft."

A snort comes from the head of the dockworkers. "That was over twenty years ago, Clara. The late emperor is gone." He's gruff and most people find him difficult, but he always saves the best catch for me when the boats come in.

"And his son is much better? Don't think he's set foot outside the capital city, much less our islands," she huffs. "He's a tyrant just like his father, and his grandfather before that. War with Khayal is inevitable with him on the throne."

The dockworker shifts in his seat, suddenly uncomfortable under Clara's glare—usually women don't partake in council meetings. Her husband waves a hand, as though to calm her. "Our village has enjoyed peace for twenty years, but my love has a point. A change in royalty can still affect us. This news of making Orysia a navel base is unsettling to say the least."

Father lets the disgruntlement go on and waits until everyone has been served food before speaking. He once told me that men were much more rational when fed and content, that it was the secret to snagging a good husband. I figured that was how my mother had won him over.

"I know we have our gripes about the empire," he begins, "but they are militant and experienced in battle. If their attitude towards our islands changes, we'll lose more than just the upcoming tourists. Kalyna's council was removed just last month when they refused to cooperate."

Kalyna is the most visited of the island colonies, its ports always crowded with merchants and wealthy Dravarians escaping the mainland winters. Skirmishes happen. Drunken fights between villagers and dravarians happen. The Empire rules over us, but exercising that power, removing an entire council, is different.

His gaze sweeps across the table. "I know how men like these operate. If they're heading this way with trained men, we can't remain passive."

"So what then? Roll over and allow them to tell us what to do?" the moneylender says with disdain, stroking his beard. "I didn't take you for a coward, Gaius."

"I'm a man of reason," Father says evenly, though I see the man's words hurt him. He is no coward, but he fears the Empire more than anyone I know. It's why he insists every man and boy in the village learn how to defend himself. It's why he established the weekly training sessions in the square.

There will come a time, my father once told me after I'd been soundly beaten in my first match years ago, *when you'll have to protect yourself. I won't always be alive and here for you.*

"Our friend Lord Marcellus has offered to arrange passage to the Isle of Asra. He can prepare ships within the month, beginning with the council and their families. He's assured us that the rest of the village will follow," Father continues.

Isle of Asra? That's practically Khayal. I'm just as surprised as the rest of them. Murmurs spread through the hall, the objections coming all at once.

"*In Khayal? What a ridiculous proposition!"*
"They're the enemy. How could we?"
"That's a month of sailing! Are you mad?"

The kingdom of Khayal lies westward, far beyond the Western Plains. Few make the journey across the desert and badlands separating their land from the Empire. By ship, we could bypass that entirely, but the western seas are treacherous. Even the mighty Dravarian Empire has failed to conquer Khayal in nearly five hundred years. The Sultan's reign is steady, his princes powerful.

The Isle of Asra is a neutral territory in the western seas, though it has strong historical and cultural ties to Khayal. A Khayali princess was once banished there, and the isle remains so remote that neither superpower has shown much interest in claiming it.

"And what happens if we get to the Isle and find ourselves in the middle of war close to enemy lands?" Clara demands.

Father doesn't answer immediately. He glances towards Ebroin, who shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

"There have only been rumors," Father admits. "Both Khayal and the Empire are gathering arms, and neither has much love for the other. I cannot promise that we'll be any safer there than we are here."

"Then why in the gods' names are we even considering it?" the dockworker demands.

"Because I cannot promise that we'll be safe here, either. First it's the removal of our council, then the drafting of our children and capable men, and who's left to defend our women and children?"

A silence falls over the table.

"We're not Dravarians," the dockworker snaps. "We're respectable Orysians. We don't even look like mainlanders."

Ebroin coughs at this, and the man nods with a hint of embarrassment. "Excuse me, my lord," he says, then glances towards Father and me. "And you as well, Gaius. But I'm saying that this will not be our war."

My father taps the table, catching everyone's attention before speaking again. "Whether we like it or not, we *are* part of the Empire." There's a long pause he takes as he inspects Ebroin, as if wanting to say something more. "I do believe that whether we stay or go, there will be a risk. Lord Marcellus has thus offered us safe passage, out of respect for our friendship and the Orysian community's safety."

It's a strange proposition.

Most Orysians are like me. They've lived here their whole lives. Maybe they were born on a different island or elsewhere, maybe their parents were, but this is where their families are. Where they've built their homes and livelihoods.

This is home. We've spent years training to defend ourselves, and at least here we know the land. Surely we'd stand a better chance here fighting the mainland than in the Isle.

I hate that Sepi might've been right about the war.

"Father," I whisper carefully, "what about Leo's wedding? The merchants have already brought in extra goods in anticipation, the butcher's family has been preparing livestock. I just sent word to the dockmaster's son to invite traders from the neighbouring villages."

By tradition, the women oversee the wedding preparations, and I had worked quickly. The chieftain's son and the sweetheart of the village are practically royalty here.

I watch as my father's mouth presses into a thin line. Voices of agreement and concern continue to ripple around the table. Yet there's conflict in his eyes, and I think he can be swayed. Father has always thought about the villagers. That's why they made him chieftain—because he's loyal and cares about the village's well-being.

"Why don't we put it to a vote?" I ask in a louder voice so the others can hear. "We can't make everyone happy. This way, at least everyone has a say about whether we risk staying or leaving."

Father doesn't reprimand me, instead he looks around the table at the expectant faces before giving a slow nod. "Very well. We'll put it to a vote." His gaze sweeps over the room again, a habit of authority. "Those in favour of staying?"

Seven hands rise. Seven remain lowered. Ebroin, a guest rather than a councilman, doesn't vote.

Silence settles over the hall as everyone looks around the table. I look at Father. His hand stays at his side. I follow his gaze, and he's staring long and hard at the lord.

Father closes his eyes for a long moment before letting out a weary sigh. Slowly, he raises his hand. My heart leaps.

"No!" a voice barks. We all turn to Ebroin, who has been quiet this whole time. "Don't be foolish! Think of what you have to protect. You have to leave these islands before the Empire decides otherwise." His expression is full of concern. It feels like an overreaction.

Father shakes his head firmly. "If my vote is to decide this, then I choose Orysia over exile. This is where our lives are, and I will not uproot these ties. If the Empire and Khayal truly come to blows, nowhere on the continent is truly safe."

He pauses, his gaze passing over the councilmen.

"We know these islands. We have our homes, our families, and twenty years of peace behind us. The Empire has made no demands of us yet, and I will not abandon our village on rumours alone. We'll prepare for the worst, but until we have reason to believe our lives are in immediate danger, I believe we're better off remaining where we are."

He glances towards me before looking back at the table. There's still muttering, but the voices of agreement are stronger. It's done. One by one, each man gathers his belongings and makes for the door, greeting Clara, who has moved to the stairs, on their way out. They mutter thanks for the food and hospitality.

Ebroin rests his chin on his hand with displeasure. His eyes settle on me as everyone files out of the room, lingering long enough that I shift beneath his stare. I've sat through enough council meetings to know that a nobleman joining one is very unusual.

Father stands and wraps an arm around my shoulder as we watch the others leave. I wince hard as he clutches my left shoulder, the one I injured. He notices.

Clara shoots a concerned look between him and the nobleman, but he gives her a tacit nod, and she descends the stairs, her light orange tunic flowing behind her.

"Is this really your decision to make?" the lord demands once Clara is gone. Father tenses beside me. "You're putting too much at risk… Gaius." His tone softens slightly, though the anger remains. "This is not what he wants, and it's a poor choice to make."

"*He* can come and tell me that himself," Father says coldly, his eyes narrowing. I see the soldier in him as his grip around me tightens. "This is my village. My family. I'll decide what's best. It was always going to be difficult to have them leave for the Isle."

"You forget yourself."

“It’ll do us no good to be caught up with either side. You'd have us abandon our homes on the promise of safety? The council and their families leave first, while everyone else waits for ships that may never come?” Father’s eyes narrow. “I'm not so naive as to believe you've arranged more than a single ship, Lord Marcellus. We are not pawns in your games of power.”

The nobleman frowns, then sighs deeply. “Do you understand the risks we're taking to send you so far away? You, of all people, should know.” Ebroin pushes himself up from his chair with some effort and walks towards us. “I'll leave a few of my men here in case you change your mind.” He turns to me. “You too, Katalin.”

I cringe at the sound of my full name. Nobody calls me that. Father keeps a steady hand on my shoulder, notably with a lighter touch. I’m still confused. While we’re removed from the Dravarian Empire, we *are* a part of them. It didn’t make sense to me why this lord and whoever he worked for wanted us to go to the Isle of all places.

The lord ambles away. He has a limp that I didn't notice before. But it becomes obvious as he descends the stairs, one hand gripping the railing.

I turn to Father, who's staring out the window towards the sea. Beyond it, somewhere past the horizon, lies the Dravarian mainland, his old home and the place where Leo and I were born. I've always known Father to be certain of himself, but I've never seen him so troubled.

Then he turns to me. “Now Kitti,” he says and I brace myself for a lecture. “What happened to your shoulder?”

CHAPTER 2: THE WEDDING

By the time Leo's wedding day arrives two months later, I've almost forgotten why we ever considered leaving. I've celebrated my nineteenth birthday, and no Dravarian soldiers have come. War is just a constant rumor. Whatever fear gripped Orysia has slowly given way to the ordinary rhythms of village life.

I spend the afternoon with the other village girls, helping braid their hair and watching them weave flower laurels. In Orysia, the marriage ceremony is a private affair between the couple and a holy witness on behalf of the gods. Afterwards, we all celebrate with a feast, and that is the part everyone actually cares about.

My contribution to the feast is lighting the bonfire.

I stand on a makeshift stage in front of the newly married couple. As the sky begins to darken, I light the oil-soaked cloth at the end of my arrow. I feel the heat as it flares, then draw my bow and aim towards the great stack of wood in the centre of the village. The arrow sails over the gathering and buries itself in the kindling. Flames catch almost at once, climbing up the tower of wood. The crowd erupts into cheers.

Leo raises his goblet to me nearby. I grin and lift my bow in return. Music rises from fiddles and hand drums as sparks spiral into the sky and people begin pairing off to dance.

I wear one of my nicest dravarian-style dresses, a high-collared white gown, though much more flowing past the waist than the style on the mainland. The skirt twirls whenever I spin. I've paired it with a black sleeveless overcoat tied at the waist and a lovely pair of white boots. It's more traditional to wear bright spring colours, woven with ribbons and flowers, but I feel the black suits my pale skin and eyes better. My dark chestnut hair is arranged in thick braids that tumble down my back, dotted with tiny white blossoms someone insisted on weaving through them. Even my face is painted today.

Mabel looks lovely beneath a light green veil that falls over her long black hair. The village dressmaker has spent weeks sewing her gown, layering emerald velvet over pale gold fabric, with a high collar and rows of gold braided fastenings across the bodice. Delicate gold vines trail down the flowing split sleeves and floor-length skirt, while an ornate gold belt cinches her waist. Beside her, Leo is equally handsome, his dark hair slicked back and his formal Dravarian clothing in imperial white, as is tradition. They look absolutely regal.

I leave them to their well-wishers and fetch myself a cup of ale, then settle onto a fallen log repurposed as a makeshift bench. The bonfire roars before me, washing everyone's faces in warm orange light as couples swirl in a wide ring around the flames. The smell of smoke mingles with roasted meat, fresh bread and sweet ale. Beyond the rooftops, the sea is a dark expanse beneath the rising moon.

I feel a presence behind me and nearly jump.

"May I take a seat?" a voice calls.

I turn to find Jun smiling warmly at me. The corners of his dark eyes crinkle. Perhaps the ale is getting to me already.

"Not planning to dance?" he asks, raising an eyebrow.

I'd stepped on more than a few feet last year. I'm simply not very good at being so close to people, something about feeling their breath and seeing their expressions. It's the same with swordplay.

He shrugs. "You're like a cat, always watching and waiting to pounce, but only on your own terms." His gaze drifts to my dress, and I blush a little when it lingers. "Though if I'd found you sooner, perhaps we could've danced before the square filled up and saved you the embarrassment." A smile tugs at his lips. "Who wears black to a wedding? You were impossible to find."

"You weren't looking hard enough," I laugh, flushing. "I shot the opening arrow!"

"I know. I saw." There's a twinkle in his eye. “Clean shot."

He always praises my archery. It's why I love hunting with him.

Jun wears a long crimson vest embroidered with simple gold stitching over a white tunic, the rich red standing out against the sea of spring colours. We fall into easy conversation, catching up on the ordinary happenings of our lives. I haven't had the chance to speak much with him, what with the wedding preparations.

He tells me his mother is expecting before the end of the year. The pregnancy is still a secret, he admits, and he isn't sure how he feels about suddenly becoming an older brother after so many years. His mother is one of the village midwives, and Jun has spent much of his childhood helping his parents with their medical shop. I'd certainly been grateful for that when he put my shoulder back into place.

"Siblings aren't all they're cracked up to be," I say smugly, kicking at the dirt beneath my boots.

He shrugs. "You say that because you're the younger one. Besides, we're almost twenty. We can't stay children forever."

I wrinkle my nose. "Have you ever thought about going back to Taiga?" I ask absently, wanting to change the subject.

Jun cocks his head for a moment, then laughs softly. "No, not at all. I grew up here. This is my home." He looks around at the dancing couples and the roaring bonfire. "Everyone's kind and accepted even someone like me. I don't see why I'd ever want to leave."

"You're a likable person," I say. "Of course they would accept you. Taigan or not."

Jun looks almost relieved, but I'm not sure why. "I'm glad you think so." His eyes linger on mine. "I hope that includes you."

I blink. He leans towards me, and I swear he's about to kiss me, but he merely reaches up and plucks a white blossom that's fallen loose in my hair. He turns it between his fingers, smiling to himself. I feel disappointed.

Children dart between the adults, laughing as they chase one another with flower crowns, while the elders clap along to the music from their benches around the fire. Everyone raises their glasses to Mabel and Leo as they pass, and I watch as my brother offers his hand and they step down into the square.

They are exactly what the villagers consider a perfect couple. Leo is muscular from years of training with Father. Mabel is graceful and gentle mannered, her lovely black hair effortlessly silky. I watch them for a moment, noticing how naturally they move together. Half the village boys once fancied Mabel, but none more than Leo.

They wear matching flower wreaths. Leo doesn't care for flowers.

I'm pulled out of my daydream as Jun nudges me. "Are you still mad at Brutus for dislocating your shoulder? You know he's been sulking that you haven't come to practice since."

No, I'd already forgiven Brutus. I'd genuinely been busy with wedding preparations, and before I knew it, I'd dragged out the conversation too long for it to feel natural. At this point, I was too awkward and stubborn to start it.

"I'm not," I say honestly. "But he shouldn't have been so rough. You know my father got so mad at me that day, I was forced to stay home for two full weeks!"

"You needed the rest anyway," he says. "How's it feeling, by the way?"

I windmill my left arm with vigour, then immediately regret it as I feel a twinge of pain.

"It's fine now," I say.

Jun squints at me. Maybe it's because he's been around so many patients that he can sense I'm lying through my teeth.

"Don't overdo it." Then he stands and offers me his hand. "Let's use your legs instead."

I let him lead me into the ring of dancers. The bonfire burns bright, its heat washing over us whenever we circle close. Music echoes across the square as fiddles, drums and cheerful singing blend into one lively rhythm. I laugh too, letting myself get swept into the celebration and twirling in his hands. I step on his toes a few times, but he doesn't seem to mind.

We nearly collide with Rex, who's enthusiastically attempting to impress a girl with a particularly elaborate dance. Sepi, standing nearby with a cup in his hand, looks utterly disgusted.

"Gods, Princess," he calls when he notices us. "You're stepping on his feet!"

"Mind your own business!"

"Poor bastard. I give him another five minutes."

Rex turns towards us, grinning. "I'll wager he doesn't last three!"

"Give Jun a break and come dance with me for once, will you?" Sepi hollers.

I raise an eyebrow. "And let you step on mine? Not a chance."

Jun laughs and pulls me away. I stick my tongue out at them, and Sepi raises his cup in mock salute. When I glance back a moment later, he's still watching us. He looks away when he catches my eye.

We dance until my feet ache and Jun's cheeks are flushed from the heat. Eventually, we stumble back towards the tables in search of something to eat.

Leo and Mabel have settled on the wooden dais, the couples' table, with a few friends and relatives. There's a young man I don't recognize chatting with Mabel. He's tall and lanky, with dark hair and handsome features, lounging comfortably with one arm resting on the back of Mabel's chair and a cup of wine in his other hand. His richly embroidered vest looks expensive, and several polished rings glitter on his fingers whenever he gestures.

"Congratulations!" I tell Leo, throwing my arms around him before he can protest. "You're officially Mabel's problem now. Gods help her."

Leo grunts and pushes me away, but he's smiling. Mabel laughs beside him and tucks one hand through his arm. I point accusingly at the laurel still sitting on my brother's head. Leo's expression immediately sours.

"You know, Mabel, this guy hates flowers."

Mabel looks coy. "I know."

Leo ruffles my hair, sending several of the little white blossoms tumbling to the ground. "Hey!" I shout, but we're all laughing.

"Oh, hey, Kitti. Keen to show off some party tricks?" Leo asks suddenly.

"Like what?"

"We could shoot some oranges. Something small, whatever." Leo points a thumb at the stranger with Mabel, who gives me a lopsided smile and introduces himself as her cousin, Remi.

He's a jeweler from one of the neighbouring islands, visiting for the wedding and hoping to find a few customers among the guests. Mabel tells me he spends much of his time travelling between the islands and the mainland, selling jewelry to wealthy merchants.

I suddenly see the family resemblance. Good looks run in the family, it seems.

"This guy thinks your shooting was a fluke earlier," Leo continues.

"No, I said it's hard to miss such a large target," Remi corrects him, taking another sip of wine.

"My baby sister is the best shot I know. Don't underestimate her," Leo says, cocking his head. Compliments are strange coming out of his mouth.

Remi shrugs, obviously not seriously invested in the conversation.

"Oh, shut up," I mutter. Leo grins.

"It's true," Jun adds beside me. I nudge him, but he continues. "Can shoot a rabbit in the eye from any distance. Best there is." He leans closer. "Show him what's what," he whispers with a smile.

I see four pairs of expectant eyes on me. My cup of ale sits nearly untouched on the table, and I'm feeling rather pleased with myself after the opening ceremony.

"Fine," I say.

Jun goes off to find some targets, and I remain on the dais, chatting with the other three. Remi's a bit arrogant when I ask him how he's enjoying the island and festival. He complains about the lack of proper fabrics of the dresses before him (except Mabel's), though he admits the

wedding does have good wine. He's apparently spent enough time among wealthy mainlanders that he now considers himself something of an expert on their customs and luxuries.

Mabel seems happy chatting with him, and Leo is amiable enough, though he's too competitive to like another man until they've crossed swords.

"Did you know?" Remi drawls, tipping his cup towards me. "I had a commission from a highborn Dravarian noblewoman last spring. Wouldn't even show me her face."

"Measurements? Without seeing her?" I thought he was a jeweler.

"For a necklace, my dear. She wore a masquerade mask the entire time." He takes another sip of wine. "It's all the fashion among highborn women in the capital. The grander the lady, the less likely you are to see her face."

"That's a stupid rule." I laugh. "If they're highborn enough, won't people know them anyway? Besides, everyone on Orysia knows one another. Even if we wore masks, I'd recognize them."

Remi snorts. "That's the point, sweetheart. They're not meant to be recognized by the common folk. Women of their standing are to be seen, not known." He gestures vaguely towards the dancers. "And you ought to see how pale some of them are. It's a mark of refinement. Means they have all the time in the world for fine arts and social occasions instead of working under the sun."

"Sounds like they're caged birds, more like."

In Orysia, richer skin was considered more beautiful, like Mabel. I often lamented that I was not sun-kissed enough.

There's a pause as he eyes me over the rim of his cup. I don't particularly care for his attitude. Father expected me to be well-read and educated, but also capable of defending myself. I think I took to the latter a little more enthusiastically than he'd intended. Either way, I certainly wouldn't want to spend my life hiding my face behind some ridiculous mask.

Mabel looks between the two of us before smoothly changing the subject.

"Have you seen Gaius? He hasn't come back to give us his blessings."

"Strange. Maybe it's the council."

Father had bid me farewell in the morning, but he'd slipped away before the feast to attend to some business. I'd thought nothing of it at the time, but the bonfire has been burning for hours now.

Leo scratches his chin. He's clean-shaven for the wedding; Mabel must've convinced him, as just last week he was saying he wanted to grow out a beard. Makes him look more manly, he claimed.

"By the way, Kitti, I remembered something when I was chatting with one of the villagers earlier. About the Dravarian noble from a couple months ago."

"Ebroin Marcellus?"

"Yeah. I was pretty young at the time, but I think he might've babysat us for a while. Back in Dravaria, I mean. Probably why he knew your name."

I'm not surprised to be connected to nobles in some way, since Father was a soldier at some point and would've interacted with them often, but that the man would have been looking after us. I try to picture Ebroin without his expensive coat and ridiculous handkerchief, looking after two small children instead. I can't imagine it.

I open my mouth to ask more, but Remi slaps Leo on the shoulder just as Jun returns with three oranges.

"Let's see this skill of hers!" There's a fire in his voice now. I grab my bow and quiver.

"Not too drunk, are ya?" Jun asks.

"Come on. You know me better than that," I laugh.

Remi tosses the first orange high, and I hit it before it starts to fall. His eyes widen.

He throws the next one harder. It bursts in a spray of peel and pulp. "You practice this. It's easier than it looks," he says.

"We'll make it more interesting then." Leo holds up the last orange. "Jun, mind being decoration for a bit?"

Jun grins, takes the orange, and weaves through the dancers before balancing it on his head.

"What if you hit someone?" Remi asks.

"Nah, that's not what Leo said to do. He said to hit the orange."

Two girls cross in front of Jun, laughing as they pass a flower crown between them. I wait until the dancers drift towards the bonfire and the ground behind him clears. He's still standing there with that ridiculous grin.

I draw and loose. The orange flies clean off his head. A woman shrieks.

"Are you out of your bloody minds?" someone shouts.

Jun throws his hands up, laughing through an apology as a few villagers start to cheer. I lower my bow and wince at the twinge in my left shoulder. Father would have my head if he'd seen that.

"I don't miss." I wink.

Remi whistles, then slowly begins to clap slowly, like the first after a performance. "Kitti, was it?"

I curtsy dramatically for effect. He's studying me now.

"You looking for a husband soon? A noble friend of mine loves wild women, y'see, and—"

"I ought to tell you about the time she broke my arm," Leo says flatly. I can tell he's bristled. "Or how she quite recently punched another boy and broke his nose." Oh no, did I really hit Brutus that hard?

Mabel joins the conversation with ease. "Be a good cousin and grab us some food, will you?" she says, glaring at the young man. Her voice is sweet, but she has her ways.

Remi shrugs and heads off, his fine boots clicking against the wooden steps. I watch him disappear into the crowd, and Mabel sighs as Leo runs a hand through his hair. She pats his arm in a comforting gesture, and I notice her new wedding ring as it catches the flicker of firelight. It is the ring Mother used to wear, and it's Mabel's now.

"You're too good for him, you know?" Leo tells me. "Or whoever his dravarian friend is."

I stare at him. Leo is apparently more drunk than I thought.

"Nothing against the prissy, but you're my sister! Hell if I'll let him lay a hand on you—"

"Ew, stop it!" I laugh. "He's not my type."

Mabel laughs too and winks at me as she pulls him away. He protests, but she is having none of it.

"You damn drunk! Mabel's way too good for you!" I call after him.

I follow them down the steps of the wooden dais. Mabel is pulling Leo back towards the bonfire, encouraging him to dance. She's beautiful in her dress, and there's a pang of jealousy when Leo picks her up and spins her around, much to her delight. They're so in love.

I look around, expecting Jun to return any moment. He's been swarmed by villagers, and some of the girls too. I can't tell whether they're angry about the arrow or simply wanting to dance with him.

Instead, I spot Brutus with Rex and Sepi near one of the tables. He's laughing at something Rex has said, his enormous shoulders shaking. Sepi notices me first and raises his eyebrows, apparently surprised that I'm looking in their direction. I cringe and groan to myself. Better now than later. Once the wedding is over, I really have no excuse for avoiding the square and the boys.

I make my way over, weaving between the dancers and narrowly avoiding a child running past with a flower crown. Rex greets me with a particularly obnoxious grin.

"Look who's finally decided to show her face! And she looks like an actual girl today."

"Shut up, Rex." Though it's true, I rarely wear dresses around them.

Sepi snorts. "Careful, Brutus. She might break something else this time."

"Only if he deserves it," I say, crossing my arms.

Brutus turns towards me. He's looking rather sheepish now, though I notice him briefly rubbing his face. For a moment, neither of us says anything. It's ridiculous, really. We've known each other for years, and now I can't seem to find anything to say to him.

"Your shoulder all right?" he asks finally.

"It's fine. Mostly. I shot some good arrows earlier."

He nods, looking relieved. "I didn't mean to drop you, you know."

"I know." I hesitate. "But you did throw me over your shoulder like a sack of flour."

"You elbowed me in the neck!"

"Better to wear your shield on your back next time then."

There's a pause, then Rex bursts out laughing. Even Sepi cracks a grin, and Brutus stares at me for a moment before letting out a great booming laugh of his own. I can't help joining in. Gods, I've missed these idiots. My idiots.

"You're beyond stubborn." Brutus scratches the back of his head, looking much more like himself. "So, are we going to see you at training again?"

"Of course. I'll be at the next one."

"Good. I've been getting bored beating these two."

"Oh, fuck off!" Rex protests, giving him a shove that barely moves him.

I smile, feeling rather pleased that everything has gone back to normal. Sepi offers me a cup of something, but I wave him away. I've had enough ale for one night.

Then I catch sight of Father cutting through the crowd.

He's wearing his finest clothing, but his expression is hard, and I can tell he's only just returned. His face is pale beneath the firelight, and he's moving with such urgency that he nearly knocks into a passing villager. The man turns to glare at him, but Father doesn't even notice.

I straighten. There's something wrong.

"Kitti," he gasps when he reaches me, out of breath. His eyes dart towards the boys before settling on me. "We have to go. Now."

"What's happening?"

He seizes my wrist and pulls me away before I can get an answer. I stumble after him, throwing a confused glance over my shoulder. Brutus looks as bewildered as I feel, and Sepi has stopped laughing.

"Wait!" I protest, trying to pull free.

Father ignores me.

We slip through the crowd and into the quiet alleys beyond the square. The music softens behind us, as does the crackle of the bonfire and the distant laughter drifting through the night. Our footsteps echo against the whitewashed walls as Father leads me down a narrow passage.

His grip around my wrist hurts.

"Father, what's happening?" I demand again.

He doesn't answer. He keeps glancing behind us, his free hand resting near the hilt of his sword. I've seen him angry, and I've seen him troubled, but never like this. He's frightened. A cold feeling settles in my stomach. I don't know what could possibly frighten a man like my father, and I suddenly wish we were back at the wedding, surrounded by the others.

"*Fidelis*!"

His real name slips out before I can stop it. He stops so abruptly that I nearly collide with him. For a moment, he simply stares at me. Then his expression hardens. We were never to use it again after coming to Orysia.

"They're here for me." His voice is low. He's a soldier again. "The past has finally caught up with us."

"Who?"

"The Dravarians. Imperial soldiers."

I stare at him. I know Father changed his name when we came to Orysia, but he's never explained why. Whatever he's done, I certainly hadn't expected it to bring imperial soldiers to our village. The council meeting replays in my head.

"What did you do?"

"There's no time. Listen to me, Kitti. They're not here to talk. Run straight to the house and hide. Take the back streets and don't let anyone see you. There's a ship waiting at the docks, and I'll come for you as soon as I can."

"Then come with me!"

"I have to find Leo and Mabel." He glances over his shoulder again. "They know you're my daughter. They'll use you to get to me."

"Then why can't we all go together?"

"We will, but I need you out of sight first. I'll bring them to the house, and we'll take the back way to the harbour. Understand?"

He grabs me by the shoulders. "I'm here to protect you. Do as I say, and we'll survive yet."

I see the desperation in his weathered eyes. For the first time in my life, my father looks genuinely frightened, and that scares me more than anything he's said.

Then the screams begin.

CHAPTER 3: FIDELIS

This is nothing like I've trained for. There is something nightmarish about the sound of true, horrified screaming. It's the sound of people who are afraid they're going to die.

We left the square only moments ago, and I can still see a sliver of it down the street.

"Go!" Fidelis urges, pushing me away from the celebrations.

The bonfire is still burning brightly, but the music has stopped. Villagers scatter in every direction as arrows slam into the towering pyre, sending burning logs crashing into the crowd. Sparks scatter across the balconies and canopies nearby, flames catching on the buildings. Then I see figures moving through the chaos—soldiers in boiled leather chest pieces over white tunics. I recognize the sigil branded on their chests and shields because everyone knows the Silver Sun, the sigil of the emperor. Imperial troops.

Dread settles in my stomach.

My bow. It's still tucked away by the dais. It's foolish, I know, but as soon as Father disappears around the corner, my feet are already carrying me back toward the square. I'm in black; perhaps I have a better chance of slipping in and grabbing it. I'm fast. I can outrun armored men. I gather my skirts in my hands and sprint, my heart hammering against my ribs.

I almost stop at the first sight of blood, but I force myself to keep moving, jumping over fallen people and overturned furniture as the sounds of celebration give way to the clash of metal and screams.

I reach the dais in moments and snatch up my bow and quiver. From here I can see the whole square, and it's mayhem. Women flee or cower beneath tables while some of the men have found weapons or wrestled them from soldiers. It hardly matters. The imperial troops cut down anyone who attacks them with frightening ease.

I turn, ready to flee. Then I spot Mabel.

Leo has found a sword and is fighting off two men, but Mabel is trapped behind him. I need to run, yet the next thing I know I'm closing in on her, an arrow already nocked. One of the soldiers turns and I release into the exposed skin above his armor. He splutters and grasps at his neck before collapsing.

I reach for another arrow, but my hands are shaking.

Leo crosses swords with the second soldier and gestures sharply for us to run. Mabel grabs my arm with surprising strength and pulls me away. We're halfway across the square when

an arrow whistles overhead, sending us scrambling to the ground. Dirt fills my mouth. I spit and look up to see archers lining the rooftops.

"Dravarian bastards," Mabel mutters.

I've never heard her curse before. She looks terrified, but there's something fierce in her expression too. I scan for the others. Jun has found a sword. Brutus shouts as he lifts a grown man and throws him overhead, while Rex and Sepi tear a weapon from another fallen soldier. They're not standing around helplessly. They're fighting.

They'll be alright.

A hand catches the back of my dress and yanks me away. The soldier is bigger than me, and I'm wrestling him in a fucking dress.

"Let her go!" Mabel shouts, grabbing his arm.

He swats her away, but the distraction is enough. I slip free of my black overcoat and drop, kicking his legs from beneath him before he can recover. He slams into the ground with a groan.

"Girls!" The docksman barrels toward us with a hatchet in hand, blood splattered across his fine clothing. I don't know if it's his. I hope it isn't. "You need to run!"

The soldier on the ground reaches for me. The docksman sees him and brings the hatchet down into his chest with a horrifying crunch. The man goes still.

Mabel and I stare.

Another man dead.

We need to go. I need to get Mabel somewhere safe. Then I can come back.

"Fire!"

The docksman looks up just as a volley of arrows hurtles toward us. He throws himself over Mabel and me, forcing us flat as arrows rain into the square. Screams rise around us. Something heavy strikes the ground beside my head, then another. When the docksman finally slumps against us, several arrows protrude from his back.

His mouth opens, but no words come out.

My throat tightens. Not now.

I scramble out from beneath him and reach for my quiver. The archers are already preparing another volley. I draw and release, then reach immediately for another arrow. The first man drops. I shoot a second, then a third, barely waiting to see them fall before moving to the

next. By the time the remaining figures disappear behind the roofline, Mabel is pulling at my arm.

Or maybe I grab hers. I don't know. We run.

Arrows strike the ground around us as we flee. One catches the hem of my skirt and I stumble, grab a fistful of fabric and tear it free before scrambling after Mabel.

"Father told me to hide at our house," I gasp. "We have a hidden room. We'll go there."

Mabel nods, but takes one last look toward the square. Toward Leo.

"He'll be okay," I tell her. He can fight. Father trained him for years; no foot soldier is going to beat him, not in this lifetime.

The soldiers came from the docks, and the farther inland we go, the quieter it becomes. By the time we reach the house, both of us are struggling for breath.

I shove the door open, lock it behind us and lead Mabel into the storage room at the back. A barrel conceals one of the floorboards. I push it aside, wedge the tip of my bow beneath the plank and heave until the hidden compartment opens.

"Wait." Mabel runs back into the kitchen and returns with a cutting knife. She grips it tightly when I stare at her. "It's better than nothing."

I don't think she knows how to use it, but the determination on her face stops me from saying so.

Mabel lowers herself into the small space, but I remain crouched above her with one hand on the opening. "Mabel, I need to go back. I can fight, and I won't let my friends die. I can't leave my family there."

Her expression tightens. "They'd rather you stay alive."

I shake my head. "This is what we train for."

Her lips press together, but before she can argue, faint voices reach us from outside. I snap my head toward the window. Light passes across it, disappearing before another glow follows.

They're circling the house.

"Is this his place?" a young man asks.

Mabel's eyes meet mine. I jump into the compartment after her and quietly lower the lid above us. Wood splinters toward the front of the house as they break through the door. Moments later, light spills into the storage room.

“Anything?” a gruff, older voice demands.

“No, just foodstuffs. I’ll check upstairs, Commander.”

The younger man’s footsteps move away, but another, heavier set crosses the kitchen.

“Godsdamned traitor,” the commander mutters. “After what he’s done, he’s been living a peaceful little life in the middle of nowhere.”

A string of hateful, personal curses follows. This isn’t the anger of a soldier hunting some faceless criminal. Whoever this man is, he knows my father.

The stairs creak as the younger soldier searches above us. A short while later, he returns. “There’s no one, sir. Empty.”

“He’s probably departing the island as we speak, the bastard!” Something clatters across the floor, as if the commander has kicked a chair aside. He falls silent for a moment. “No. He would’ve left much earlier. The wedding tonight is for his son. The man always doted on his family. His weakness. That and the woman he ran off with.”

I suddenly feel cold.

It wouldn’t have been difficult information to gather. Everyone knew Leo and Mabel were getting married; we’d spoken about it for months. They hadn’t simply found us tonight. They had waited until everyone was gathered in one place, celebrating and drinking, until our guard was down.

Mabel grips my arm as though she can feel me tensing beside her. My blood boils. The docksman and everyone else I watched fall—they chose tonight knowing exactly it was a night of celebration.

I understand now why Father was absent. He hadn’t known they would come tonight, but he knew we were at risk. He came from the docks when he found me. He must have been watching for trouble.

“They say Fidelis has a daughter too,” the younger soldier says.

The commander snorts. “I’d take her myself if I got the chance. The traitor and his whole family deserve slow deaths.”

“And the son?”

“The son has a new wife.”

“Heard she’s pretty.”

I can almost hear the commander smiling when he answers. “You can have her if she’s alive after all this, Tin. Once the men are dead, we’ll take the women. They’ll learn to do as they’re told.”

Mabel’s grip tightens until it hurts. The men laugh like they’re discussing their next meal, and the casualness sends my heart pounding.

These are imperial soldiers who have seen real war. They fight and kill, not muck around in the square pretending they know how to swordfight. They wear proper armor. They move in formation. They know exactly what they’re doing.

A strong hunter is patient; she waits for her prey to lower its guard before striking true with an arrow. I only have four shots. The soldiers are moving again, toward the front door by the sound of it, so I lift the opening just enough to see the bottoms of their boots disappearing from view. Mabel tugs at me, but I shake her off.

I leap from the hidden room and press myself against the wall. A dining chair lies overturned, dirty bootprints streak across the floor and the front door hangs ajar.

A yelp comes from outside, followed by the clash of metal.

“FIDELIS!” the commander shouts. “So you really are alive, you sorry son of a—”

The clang of swords cuts him off.

I creep toward the door. Through the gap, I see Father clashing swords with a man in metal armor, a white sash crossing his chest.

“Romas,” Father says evenly. “I wish it wasn’t you who came.”

The commander lets out a bitter laugh and tears off his helmet, letting it fall into the dirt. “I don’t want your sympathy, traitor. We may have been sworn brothers once, but we were boys. I was stupid and naive to trust a man like you.”

He has grey in his hair like Father, but he’s more muscular, his armor sitting naturally on him as he moves. Father can fight—I’ve watched him do it my entire life—but Romas looks like a man who has never stepped off the battlefield.

They meet again in a shower of sparks. Romas’s armor should slow him, yet he matches Father blow for blow. Father has only his sword and none of the protection, forced to give ground whenever Romas presses forward.

Then I see it.

An angle.

I nock an arrow and draw, but just as I'm about to release, an arm closes around my neck while another catches my waist. The arrow flies wide, slicing past Romas instead of striking the exposed skin above his armor.

Shit. I was too careless. Tin must have circled around.

"Alright, girl, hold still. Don't ruin your pretty face now, yeah?" His voice is almost lazy, but his grip is iron tight. He's nearly as strong as Brutus. Nearly.

I smash my head backward with everything I have. Tin stumbles away, one hand flying to his face as I scramble free.

"You *wench.*"

Good thing he wasn't wearing a helmet. I'm glad for his arrogance.

He grabs at me and my arrows scatter across the floor. Tin draws the sword from his belt. He's too close for the bow and has the advantage. I barely hesitate before dashing through the front door. Father sees me and strikes hard at Romas, forcing him aside long enough to give me space.

"Take this!" Father pulls a dagger from behind his back—did he always carry hidden weapons?—and tosses it toward me.

No time to think. I catch it as Tin follows me into the courtyard, wiping at his bloodied face with the back of his hand.

"Damn wench headbutt me like a wild animal!" Tin growls, his voice thick with blood.

"Of course your daughter is a feral little thing," Romas taunts.

Father ignores him and attacks.

I throw aside my useless bow and hold the dagger in front of me. Tin has a longsword and knows how to use it. I crouch and lower my stance.

Moonlight washes the courtyard in silver, but beyond the rooftops Orysia burns orange, smoke rolling between the houses and carrying embers into the night. The bonfire couldn't have spread this far. The village itself must be burning.

I have no time to think about it.

Romas catches Father's blade and knocks it aside before slashing across his ribs. Father recoils, blood immediately darkening his tunic, but recovers quickly enough to meet the next strike. There are already cuts along his arm.

There's no time to hesitate. I lunge at Tin while his attention is elsewhere. He reacts a moment too late. I jerk back, then dart forward while his sword is still low and drive the dagger toward his chest. The blade glances uselessly off his armor.

He swings for my head. I duck beneath it and scramble out of reach, but his surprise quickly turns to anger. The next attack comes faster. I knock his sword aside and drive the dagger toward the gap beneath his arm, forcing him backward before I can sink it deep.

His sword flashes upward in return. I twist, but not quickly enough and the blade cuts across my side.

Searing pain races through me. I stagger back and press a hand against the wound, pulling it away red and sticky. I've been struck plenty of times in training, but never like this. There's no one calling a stop, no wooden blade leaving a bruise that will be gone in a few days.

Tin doesn't even pause. He swings again, and I barely throw myself backward before the blade passes in front of me.

"You need to run!" Father shouts.

I hate that he's worrying about me now of all times. His opponent is good, even I can see that.

We are losing, and I'm scared. I might actually die here.

Tin sees it too. He presses harder, and suddenly I'm thinking about every swing before it comes, too aware of the blade and what it can do to me. I should run like Father says. I need to run. But Mabel is still inside. Leo and the others are still fighting in the square. How could I face any of them if I leave now?

Tin drives forward. I barely catch his sword with the dagger and shove it aside, but he's stronger than me. He twists his blade and forces me backward again. I instinctively throw up my left arm to push him away.

I cry out as my arm buckles. For one horrible second, it feels exactly like it did when Brutus knocked it from its socket. Tin's eyes flick toward my shoulder, and I know immediately that he noticed.

Shit.

His next attack comes from my left. I twist away, but he follows, driving me backward until I hit the wall of the neighbouring house. His boot slams into my chest and knocks me onto my back. The dagger flies from my hand, and when I reach for it, Tin kicks it away.

“Not so feral now, are you?”

He raises his sword.

“KITTI!”

I look toward Father.

Romas doesn’t.

His sword drives into Father’s side.

“No!” I shout.

Father makes a horrible, strangled sound as Romas pulls the blade free, blood spreading rapidly across his tunic. Tin’s sword is already coming down, but Father moves.

One moment he’s several paces away, staggering from the wound, and the next he crashes into Tin from the side. Tin’s sword strikes the dirt beside my head.

Father drives a dagger beneath Tin's ribs.

Tin gasps and collapses beside me, clutching his stomach.

“Run,” Father gasps.

Romas is already behind him.

Father turns, but he’s too slow. Romas drives his sword through him, the blade punching through Father's back and bursting from the front of his chest.

For a moment, nobody moves.

Romas stands close behind him, one hand gripping Father's shoulder to hold him upright. “Your weakness,” he says quietly. “It was always going to be your family.”

Father looks down at the blade protruding from his chest, then at me. There’s blood on his lips now. I wait for him to say something—for an order, an explanation, anything—but his mouth opens and nothing comes out.

Romas tears the sword free.

Father crumples into the dirt.

I don’t remember getting to my feet or picking up Tin’s sword. One moment Father is lying there and the next I’m screaming, running straight at Romas with a sword that feels impossibly heavy in my hands. I swing with everything I have, but he blocks it easily.

The impact nearly tears the weapon from my grip. I attack and he knocks it aside. I swing again, then again, all technique forgotten. I want his head. I want his blood. I want him dead.

Romas catches my next strike and twists. Pain tears through my injured shoulder and my grip breaks. His fist crashes across my face, and I hit the ground hard enough that the world flashes white.

"Foolish girl," he says, standing over me with blood coating his sword. "Just like him."

He lifts the blade.

"Get away from her!"

Romas barely has time to turn before Mabel drives her knife into his thigh.

He roars and nearly drops his sword. Mabel tears the knife free, her face white with terror, and tries to stab him again. This time he catches her arm and backhands her hard enough to send her sprawling.

"Mabel!"

I throw myself toward him, but an arm catches me around the waist and wrenches me away.

Tin is still alive. One arm locks around me while the other presses against the wound in his stomach, blood spilling between his fingers. I thrash against him, but my left arm barely responds and every movement sends fresh pain through my bleeding side. Then footsteps thunder into the street. More imperial soldiers pour into the courtyard. There's too many.

My strength leaves me. Mabel lies several paces away, struggling to push herself upright. Father lies unmoving in the dirt. There is nothing more we can do.

"Do we kill the wenches?" Tin growls.

"No." Romas presses one hand against his bleeding thigh and looks from Mabel to me. "We'll take the girls with us. Especially her." He's pointing at me. "The traitor's daughter."

The soldiers drag Mabel to her feet. Tin does the same to me, and I fight him until he wrenches my injured arm behind my back. The pain is so violent my knees buckle.

After that, everything comes in pieces. Romas walks toward Father's body and raises his sword. I know what he means to do. I turn away before the blade falls. I look back only once as they drag us away. Fidelis has been beheaded.

They take us back to the town square with a handful of other women who are still alive. I don't see any men standing. Their bodies lie in pools of blood where they fell, mixed among overturned tables, abandoned cups and food ground into the dirt.

The survivors huddle together and weep. We're still dressed in our finest clothes, now stained with ash, mud and blood. Crushed flower wreaths lie among shattered cups and spilled ale that I can no longer distinguish from blood. Hours ago, we were dancing here.

By morning, the bonfire has burned low. Smoke hangs over the village, and the soldiers begin dragging bodies toward what remains of the flames. I don't have the heart to search for my friends. Jun. Brutus. Rex. Sepi. I tell myself I don't need to look because I already know what happened. We failed to defend ourselves.

Mabel sits pressed against me, silent now except for the occasional shudder of her breath. Then her whole body stiffens. I follow her gaze. Two soldiers carry another body toward the fire. His clothes were white once, but the fabric is dark with blood now.

Mabel makes a sound I have never heard from another person before. We cling to each other in the dirt while the soldiers carry my brother toward the flames.

It's my fault. It's all my fault. I convinced Father to stay in Orysia.