



MORIA

ONE

“You’ll be coming back with me, Keeper.”

Moria stared at the young warrior. Gavril Kitsune had escorted her across the Wastes after her village was destroyed, her people massacred. A massacre orchestrated, as she’d later discovered, by his father, the former marshal—a man long thought dead. Orchestrated and carried out with Gavril’s full knowledge. If that betrayal had not been enough, she’d been taken in battle nearly a fortnight ago and held captive at Alvar Kitsune’s compound, under Gavril’s care. Locked in a dungeon at Gavril’s command. And now, a mere day after her escape, he stood before her, with the emperor at his side, telling her she was going *back*?

Moria took a slow step backward, bumping into her wildcat, Daigo, and the emperor’s son, Tyrus. Daigo pressed against her legs, growling, his fur on end. Tyrus stepped in front of her.

"Is this sorcery?" Tyrus said. "And do not tell me you aren't a sorcerer. When we were children, you swore you were not. Lied to me, as I now realize. I told Moria once that I knew you as well as anyone could, but you have proven that I did not know you at all."

Gavril flinched at that. After everything, he actually flinched, as if wounded by his old friend's words.

Tyrus went on. "This is sorcery. It must be, to convince my father to let you take Moria."

"It is not sorcery," Emperor Tatsu said, his voice soft but firm. "It is war. I need a spy in Alvar's camp, and Gavril has convinced me he is not our enemy."

"Then make *him* the spy," Moria said. "If he is telling you he is innocent, let him prove it."

"It is not that simple," the emperor said. "Gavril's position is precarious enough. He must maintain the fiction of allegiance to his father."

"Fiction?" She looked at Gavril. "Is that what it is? But of course. It's all a terrible misunderstanding. How wronged you have been, Lord Gavril. How poorly I have treated you, when you have been nothing but kind to me."

He wouldn't meet her gaze as she spoke.

"There is no fiction here," Moria said. "Only another kind of sorcery. The one Kitsunes are best at: lies."

She turned on her heel to see Dalain, son of Warlord Okami, whose lands they were on. Her hand moved to her dagger, ready for him to block her path, but he dipped his chin and stepped aside, allowing her and Daigo to walk into the forest.

Behind her, she heard the clatter of swords—Tyrus starting to come after her. She knew that without looking. But his father said, “Let her go,” and to Moria’s relief—and yes, a little to her dismay—Tyrus obeyed.

Moria walked until she was out of sight, and then she broke into a run, a headlong dash through the trees, her chest feeling like it was going to explode, her eyes threatening to fill with tears.

What sin had she committed against the goddess to deserve this? She might not be as pious as a Keeper ought to be, but did her petty rebellions truly warrant such punishment? Her twin sister missing, the children of her village missing, her emperor handing her over to a traitor, and Tyrus . . .

No, Tyrus had done the right thing, staying by his father’s side. Filial piety above all, including any attachment to young women. Tyrus was honorable. Always honorable. And she loved him for it, even if she might desperately wish to hear his footfalls—

Boots pounded behind her. Daigo growled and she knew it was not Tyrus. She pulled her dagger as she turned. When she saw who it was, her fingers gripped the blade, and the urge to whip it with all her might was almost too much. Instead she shoved the dagger into her belt and kept running.

“Moria!”

She kept going, veering past a gnarled oak, over a stream, one boot sliding in mud, Daigo pushing against her to keep her upright.

“Keeper!”

She stopped then. Stopped and turned and saw him. A tall,

dark-skinned warrior, his figure as identifiable as his braids and his green sorcerer eyes.

“Wait, Keeper. We must speak.”

“Do not call me that,” she said through her teeth.

“I have always called you that.”

“And so you will no more,” she said. “The one who called me that was a boy I knew in Edgewood. A scowling, surly, exceedingly difficult boy . . . one who traveled with me and argued with me and fought with me. Fought at my side and told me his secrets. That boy is gone. It seems he never existed.”

Gavril sighed and pushed back his braids with an impatient hand. When Daigo growled he said, “I’m no danger to her, Daigo. I never was. I think you know that as well as she does, but you’re both too stubborn to admit it.”

“Stubborn?” Moria stepped toward him, her dagger drawn. “You dare call me *stubborn*? As if I’m a child who has made a silly error?”

“Of course not. I—”

“You will tell me you had nothing to do with the massacre? I have heard that already, *Lord Gavril*—”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Why not? That is your title now, as one of your father’s warlords. Yes, you’ve told me you knew nothing of his plans in Edgewood. But only after repeatedly insisting that you were indeed responsible. But let’s not discuss your role in Edgewood or Fairview or Northpond or the massacres there or my father’s death. Let’s talk about what you cannot deny. You said you are no threat to me. Yet within your compound, you left me in a dungeon—”

“I—”

“A dungeon. A cold and dark dungeon, without a word about my sister or Daigo or Tyrus, no idea whether they lived. In a dungeon with a guard who pissed on my blankets and spoiled my food and tried to *defile* me.”

“What did you say?” said a voice behind her.

Moria turned as Tyrus walked from the forest, breathing hard, as if he’d run ahead to cut her off. He had indeed defied his father and come for her. She felt only the first spark of mingled dismay and pleasure before she caught sight of his face—the awful expression as he bore down on Gavril, his sword out.

“Moria told me you had taken care of her,” Tyrus said.

“I did not wish you—” Moria began.

He glanced back, his eyes softening. “I know why.” He turned to Gavril again. “She told me you’d treated her well, because when she was captured, duty compelled me to make for the city, to warn my father of Jorojumo’s betrayal rather than hunt for her, and the only thing that allowed me to do so was the conviction that you *did* care for her and *would* care for her. That whatever you had done, there was still honor and decency in you. If she’d admitted otherwise? I would have blamed myself. Now I discover not only was she mistreated but . . .” Tyrus seemed to choke on the words, gripping his blade tighter. “Unsheath your sword and defend yourself.”

TWO

Gavril shook his head as Tyrus challenged him. “I’ll not.”
“You will!” Tyrus roared, and both Gavril and Moria fell back in surprise. “If you have one shred of honor left, you will defend yourself.”

“Then I have none, because I’ll not fight you, Tyrus. I understand you are upset.”

“*Upset?*” Tyrus’s roar rang through the forest again. “You threw her into a dungeon and allowed her to be—”

“I allowed nothing. I can explain.”

“Are you telling me you have an excuse? Does it involve sorcery or magics? Something that made Moria believe you abandoned her in a dungeon when you did not?”

“No, but—”

“Then there is no excuse.”

Gavril paused. “All right. Yes. There’s no excuse. I made a mistake.”

“A mistake?” Tyrus’s voice rose. “A mistake is drinking rice wine before your host. Putting a Keeper into a dungeon, when she has committed no crime, fought in no battle? That is an act of cowardice and cruelty that has no excuse. You are no longer the boy I called my friend. You are a treacherous son of a whore, and either you draw your sword and defend yourself or I will cut your head from your shoulders.”

Gavril straightened. “Then do it.”

Tyrus raised his sword tip to Gavril’s throat. “You mock me?”

“Never. I’ll not stop you. I’ll not fight you either. If this is the penalty I’ve earned, then I accept it.”

Moria rocked forward, dagger gripped. She ought not to interfere, but if she didn’t, what stayed her hand? Was it truly respect for Tyrus? Or because she *wanted* Gavril’s death? Wanted someone else to do it? Not Tyrus. Never Tyrus. He might be enraged now, but if she let him do this, he would suffer, more than Gavril.

“Defend yourself, Kitsune,” she said. “Please.”

Gavril’s gaze flickered her way. His green eyes revealed nothing, but sweat trickled from his hairline and his braids seemed to quiver.

“Do you care at all?” she asked.

His mouth opened. Nothing came out for a moment. Then he collected himself and said, in his usual dispassionate way, “I was concerned for your well-being but I did what I thought necessary.”

“I’m not asking if you care about me. Do you care about *him*?” She nodded to Tyrus. “Was there ever anything in your friendship? Or were you merely using him, as the emperor’s son?”

“Of course not.”

“Then prove it by showing him the respect of a fair fight.”

Gavril’s mouth worked, but nothing came. Sweat dripped from his chin now. He turned his gaze back to Tyrus.

“I am sorry. I deeply regret any pain I have caused you—”

“Caused *me*!” Tyrus’s boot shot out and he kicked Gavril square in the stomach, knocking the young warrior onto his back. “You dare apologize to *me*? You betrayed my trust, but you betrayed *her* in every possible way. And it’s *me* you wish to apologize to?”

Tyrus brandished his sword. Even standing behind him, Moria realized he could not bring himself to swing it—as enraged as he was, that went too far. Yet having said he would, if he failed to follow through, the loss of face . . .

“Tyrus!”

Moria lunged, as if he’d been about to make the fatal blow. She put her hand against his back, feeling the bunched muscles, smelling the stink of sweat—of rage and grief and fear—as she whispered into his ear.

“Please, don’t,” she said, loud enough for Gavril to hear. “You’ll suffer more than he will, and I’ll not have that. Please.”

When Tyrus hesitated, Daigo leaped onto Gavril.

“Daigo!” Moria said. She pulled her dagger, ready to whip it if Gavril made one move to hurt her wildcat, but before he could move, Daigo had him pinned, his powerful jaws around Gavril’s throat. And that’s when Moria saw true terror in Gavril’s eyes. The honest realization that he might die.

“Call off your wildcat, Keeper,” a voice said.

Moria looked up to see Lysias walking toward them,

followed by the emperor.

Lysias said again, "Call him off. Please, my lady."

"She cannot," Gavril managed. "He is a Wildcat of the Immortals. Possessed by the spirit of a great warrior. Bond-beast to the Keeper. Not her pet. Not her hunting cat. She cannot command him."

"I would suggest she try," Lysias said.

"No," Emperor Tatsu said as he walked into the clearing. "Gavril is right. This choice is Daigo's. Please sheathe your sword, Lysias."

"Let me speak to Moria," Gavril said, looking the wildcat in the eyes. "Allow me to explain, Daigo, and she will understand."

"And therefore not deserve an apology?" Tyrus said, sword still in hand as he moved alongside Gavril and the wildcat.

"Tyrus . . ." Emperor Tatsu said.

"You think I misspeak?" Tyrus turned on his father. "Did he tell you how he cared for her? He put her in a *dungeon*, father. A squalid dungeon with a sadistic guard who tried to violate her."

Emperor Tatsu hesitated before looking over, and while his face gave away no more than Gavril's, Moria knew this came as a surprise. He said, slowly, "Mistakes were made, but I'm sure Gavril will ensure Moria is not touched."

"*Touched?* Forgive me, Father. Let me be more blunt, if that helps. She was almost *raped* while under his care. Now you wish to send her back?"

"Moria can handle herself," Gavril said. "She fought off her attacker, and this time I will be sure she is armed secretly

with her dagger. I would never allow—”

“You *did* allow!” Tyrus bellowed. He spun on Lysias, and before the guard could draw his sword, Tyrus’s blade was at his throat.

“Run, Moria,” Tyrus said. “Take Daigo and run.”

She stepped backward, her gaze on Gavril. He shifted, but at a look from Emperor Tatsu, he did not move.

“Where will she go, Tyrus?” the emperor asked. “Lord Okami has some of the best hunters in the empire. They will find her.”

“That depends,” Tyrus said. “You said yourself that I was safe here because the Gray Wolf is no slave to the emperor. Perhaps we’ll test that. I’ll put the case to him, and while I’m certain he’ll send men, I would not be quite so certain he’ll tell them to look very hard if I beg otherwise.”

Emperor Tatsu’s lips curved.

“You laugh at me?” Tyrus said, prodding Lysias’s neck hard enough to draw blood.

“No, my son. I’m pleased with you. While you may claim to have no head for politics—”

“Do not praise me!” Tyrus snarled. “You are trying to send a Keeper—our sacred Keeper, who has been nothing but loyal to the empire—back to a traitor. Do not cheapen my outrage by praising me.”

Emperor Tatsu dipped his chin. “I apologize.”

“Go, Moria,” Tyrus said. “I will come to you when I can, but your priority right now is your sister. Find her.”

Moria wavered there, torn between fear for his safety and fear for Ashyn’s. As much as she cared for Tyrus, Ashyn was her sister.

“Go,” Tyrus said, his voice low. “I expect no less of you.”

She’d just started to run when something flew through the air. It struck Daigo and he let out a yelp. Moria saw a dart in his shoulder. She plucked it out, but he toppled, unconscious. She dropped beside him, her fingers going to his neck.

“It is but a sedative,” Emperor Tatsu called.

Moria glared into the dark woods, looking for the attacker. “You said it was only us out here. You lied.”

“I took precautions. Your wildcat is fine. Now come back, Moria.”

She peered into the forest, and it felt as if a dozen eyes watched her.

Tyrus turned to his father. “Have I ever asked you for anything before?”

“Tyrus . . .”

“I have asked you for one favor. Only one. Do you remember what it was?”

Silence. Then the emperor said, quietly, “You asked me to allow Gavril to visit his father in prison before his exile.”

Gavril’s studied blank expression cracked. He looked at Tyrus, and even from where she stood, Moria could see the shock there. Shock and then pain.

“Yes,” Tyrus said. “Almost eighteen summers of my life, and I have asked only for one thing. Now I ask for another. Let Moria go. Whatever you need to do, find another way.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Yes, it—”

Lysias grabbed for Tyrus’s sword arm, apparently thinking him distracted. Tyrus’s sword swung and it caught the captain of the guard in the arm, blade cutting through to bone. Lysias

did not stagger back. Did not fall, howling, to the ground. He pulled his blade with his other hand and faced off with Tyrus. Blood gushed from his wounded arm. Lifeblood. Moria knew that, and she started forward instinctively, then stopped herself as Lysias's blade swung up. Tyrus countered, steel clanging.

"Tell him to give way, Father," Tyrus said.

Another swing. Another clang.

"Father! Tell him now. He's badly injured, and he cannot fight me with his off-hand. I do not wish to hurt him."

The emperor did nothing. He would do nothing, Moria knew, and not out of a callous disregard for his captain, but because he did not need to intercede. Tyrus knew Lysias. Knew him and respected him and cared about him, and it didn't matter if he could end this standoff with a single blow—he would never deliver that blow.

Moria caught a glimmer of motion and saw two men step from the forest. They quietly advanced on Tyrus.

"I'll go with Gavril," she said.

"What? No!"

Tyrus started to spin toward her. Lysias lunged, but Tyrus countered with a clash of swords that sent Lysias stumbling back. One of the men from the forest pulled his blade and stepped up behind Tyrus. Moria did not warn him, but she readied her hand on her blade for the slightest sign that the man would do more than capture him.

At the last second, Tyrus saw the second man. He spun and Lysias tried again, but as Tyrus wheeled toward the other man, he kicked Lysias, and the weakened captain toppled. Tyrus's blade swung at the second man. It hit him in the shoulder,

embedding itself in the lacquered armor, but slicing through flesh, too, the man letting out a gasp. The other warrior from the forest rushed Tyrus as Lysias staggered to his feet, his sword still in hand. Tyrus spun so fast that Moria saw only blades flash and blood arc and she rushed forward, shouting “No!” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Gavril dart forward. She wheeled on him, but he hadn’t drawn his sword. He only moved into her path, stopping her before she leaped into the fray, and by the time he did, it was over.

Tyrus had two swords at his throat. One man lay on the ground, blood soaking his breastplate. Tyrus breathed hard, more rage than exertion, like a trapped beast, face hard, nostrils flaring, watching his captors for any twitch that would allow him to escape, knowing he’d find none.

Moria started past Gavril. He put his hand on her shoulder. She shook him off.

“Let me speak to him,” she said. “I can—”

“Stay where you are, Moria,” the emperor said.

She bent and laid down her dagger. “There. Now let me—”

Two more men stepped from the forest. Both had blades raised.

“I’m not going to try anything,” Moria said. She put out her hands and turned to Gavril. “Here. Bind me.”

“That isn’t a—” he started again, but before he could finish, one of the men had grabbed her and was taking a rope from his belt.

“No,” Tyrus said. “Don’t. Father—”

“I’m fine,” Moria cut in. She smiled for him. “I can handle this. You know I can.”

There was an eerie calmness to her voice, as if her sister was there, infusing her with her quiet reason. A moon ago, Moria would have been snarling like Daigo and fighting like Tyrus, taken down only at the end of a blade. But she'd watched Tyrus—always so calm, so even-tempered—explode, and it was as if he vented her rage for her.

She let the warrior bind her, and she kept her gaze—and her smile—on Tyrus. Behind her, the emperor called for other men, presumably from the forest, telling them to transport the wounded men quickly to Warlord Okami's compound.

"Tend to Lysias's arm first," Moria said, in that same calm way. "He's lost a great deal of blood, so bind the arm before you go."

"Yes, my lady," one of the men said.

Emperor Tatsu ordered others to take Daigo back to the compound, and that's when Moria turned from Tyrus. "What? No. He must come with me."

Tyrus flexed, but one warrior had taken Lysias's place and another had stepped up behind him, so that now three blades at his neck held him as tightly as any bonds.

"Daigo must go with her," Tyrus said. "Gavril can tell his father he found them together."

"And the moment Moria misbehaves, Alvar will kill him as punishment."

"He's right," Gavril said. "As much as I would like Daigo at her side, the risk is too great."

"Then take me," Tyrus said. "Gavril found the two of us and took me prisoner, too."

"Then you would suffer the same fate as her wildcat," his

father said. "If Alvar knows she is attached to you, he will kill you to punish her. If he does not, then he will kill you to punish me."

"Why? I'm only a bastard prince."

"Exactly. Killing you is not an act worthy of retaliation. In fact, given that the empire believes you betrayed it, Alvar would be lauded for executing you, and I would be unable to retaliate." The emperor walked to Tyrus, who was still locked between the sword blades. He lowered his voice. "Alvar knows me well. He knows how to hurt me the most."

Tyrus looked away. "All right. Then I will follow them. I will camp nearby and be there for Moria."

"No, Tyrus."

"Yes, I—"

"No, Tyrus. Another word, and I'll take you back to the imperial city and put you in my own dungeon. If that's what it takes to stop you."

"I'll go," Moria said. She moved in front of Tyrus and faced the emperor, no one stopping her now that her hands were bound, her dagger on the ground. "I've said I'll go, and I'll do it alone."

"No," Tyrus said. "You—"

She turned to him. "I cannot get out of this. You know I cannot. Find Ashyn for me. Please." She looked into his eyes. "That's what I need you to do. Make sure she's safe." She walked to him, passing between the men holding him still, and pressed her lips to his. "Please."

"No," the emperor said.

"What?" She spun on him. "My sister—"

“—will be found by Goro Okami’s men.”

Tyrus stiffened. “If you think I would pursue Moria—”

“He won’t,” Moria said. “If he gives me his word that he’ll go straight after Ashyn, then there is no doubt he will.”

“Just because he stays away from Alvar Kitsune does not mean he’ll be safe. He’s been branded a traitor.”

It was *Tyrus* who had been betrayed, by an imperial warlord. But the only witness to return to the imperial city claimed the prince had been seduced by Moria, and that he’d fled the battlefield after leading his men to certain death.

The emperor continued. “With a bounty on his head, I’ll not have him roaming the lands.”

“I am a man, not a child,” Tyrus said, his voice chilling. “Perhaps you forget that. I can do as I wish.”

“Not if your emperor commands otherwise.”

“And if my emperor acts as a father and not a ruler?”

“He acts as both.”

Tyrus leaped back. The move was perfectly timed—the warriors had been intently following the conversation. They were caught off guard. Tyrus’s sword swung up, hitting one blade and then a second, and both were knocked free of the men’s grasps. Then he swung on the third, but the warrior was already in motion, the one quickest to recover, his sword firmly in his hand. Tyrus’s blade caught him in the side, not quite piercing the armor, but Tyrus yanked it free and danced back, ready for another—

Moria heard the *thwack* of the dart before she saw it coming.

Tyrus pitched forward. “No.” He staggered, turning on his

father. "No. You would not . . ."

"I would," Emperor Tatsu said softly. "To keep you safe."

Tyrus fell, and Moria knelt beside him. Tyrus's eyelids fluttered as he struggled to stay conscious. She gripped his hand, and he squeezed hers back.

"Take . . ." he whispered. "Take . . ."

His eyes closed. She leaned down and kissed him.

"I'll take care," she whispered. "You know I will."

She started to rise. Something hit her shoulder. A dart. She pushed up, turned on the emperor, and thrust her bound hands at him. "Was this not enough?"

She bore down on him, her feet tangling under her as the sedative took hold. One of the men moved as if to stop her, but Emperor Tatsu waved him back. He stepped toward Moria and caught her as she fell. As he lowered her to the ground, she said, her words slurring, "I am no spy."

"I know," he whispered.

"You do not wish me to spy on Alvar Kitsune, do you?"

"No," he said, his lips to her ears as she drifted from consciousness. "I wish you to kill him."

THREE

Ashyn stared at the man. Pale-skinned and white-haired, he had tribal tattoos of dragons on his cheeks. Not imperial tattoos like Tyrus's, but rather the intricate art of the North. His eyes were golden with slitted pupils. Dragon eyes. Then he blinked, hard, and the illusion vanished—his eyes were as blue and clear as hers.

"Ashyn," he said gently, when she didn't respond.

"You're my . . . grandfather?" she said.

He nodded. "Did your father not mention me?"

"He did not speak of my mother's family. Or his own. Once, when Moria asked, he said . . ." She swallowed. "He said it was another life. Best forgotten."

"Yes, I can see that he would. Safer for all, given the circumstances."

The circumstances. Their mother's suicide. Taking her own life to protect their father's. To ensure her daughters would not grow up orphans.

Except now they were. Not merely orphaned but without any family at all. Ashyn had spent the past moon trying to forget that. There were other things to worry about.

Yet now . . .

"My grandfather," she said slowly.

"Edwyn, if that is easier."

"Do I have . . . ?" She was about to ask if she had other family. A grandmother. Aunts. Uncles. Cousins. But that only made her think of the family she did have—namely the sister who was not here. Her gaze went to Tova, the giant yellow hound sitting at her side. Her thoughts moved slowly, still lost in the fog of the sedative.

Sedative. A noxious-smelling cloth shoved over her mouth and nose. Frantically fighting to be free, seeing a boy, slumped on the ground, arrow lodged—

"Ronan." Ashyn looked up sharply. "There was a boy—a young man—with me, felled by an arrow. Did you see him? Did you—?" She stopped short and her hand went for Tova, who rose, growling so softly only Ashyn could hear him. "The arrow. That was you. You shot him and—"

"No, child. We were following you, but Lord Okami's men felled your escort, and we took you before you were hurt."

"Escort? No. I mean, yes. Ronan *was* escorting me. But he's a friend. A good one." Her heart thumped so hard she could barely get out the words. All she could think about was Ronan, on the ground, that arrow—

"Did Dalain Okami take Ronan or . . ." She swallowed again and forced out the words. "Did you see if he lived?"

Edwyn did not answer. He simply looked at her, studying her expression.

Ashyn turned to go. Then she froze and gaped at her surroundings, her mind still fogged, having forgotten exactly where they were. In a cave. A cave that contained the skull of a dragon.

The skull of a dragon? There *were* no dragons. Creatures of myth, lost in the distant past, or perhaps never having existed at all beyond collective imagination.

Like thunder hawks and death worms. Creatures of myth, now made real by Alvar Kitsune. And dragons . . . ?

Questions for later. Actions for now. That's what Moria would say.

"I must go," she said. "I need to find out what happened to Ronan."

"He lives," Edwyn said. "We have him."

"What? Why didn't you say so?"

"He is not well, child. The outcome is uncertain."

Ashyn struggled for breath. "He might not survive?"

"The wound should have been mortal. Only swift intervention ensured it was not immediately so. But he has lost a great deal of blood and his heart is weakened. I hesitated to tell you we had him, because I am not certain we will have him for much longer."

"I—I need to see him. Now. Please."

"You say he is a friend." Edwyn studied her again. "Is he more?"

Ashyn felt her cheeks heat, but she could say with honesty, "No, he is simply a very good friend. He came with us from Edgewood." *From the Forest of the Dead, actually. Where he'd been exiled as a criminal.* But she was not explaining that. "He

escorted me across the Wastes. He was with me here as we sought to reunite with my sister and Prince Tyrus.”

“That seems very attentive for a friend.”

“Prince Tyrus hired him to accompany us.”

Edwyn frowned. “A friend who takes money to escort you?”

Frustration lashed through Ashyn. It was too much to explain, and she should not have to explain at this moment, perhaps not at any moment. As naive as she might have been leaving Edgewood, she was no longer that girl, and yet she had absolutely no doubt of Ronan’s loyalty.

She channeled her sister, straightening and saying, “Ronan is my friend and I wish to see him,” though Moria would have said something more akin to *Take me to him now*, with one hand resting on her dagger hilt.

The sterner tone seemed to startle Edwyn. Then he laughed. “You are indeed your mother’s daughter. I will send word to the healer, and after we’ve dined—”

“I will not be able to eat while a friend lies near death.”

He nodded. “I understand. Come, and then we will return here to speak. You must have many questions.”

Outside the cave, Ashyn found herself on a path, looking *down* at the forest. She gazed up at the sparsely wooded rocks rising toward the sun.

“These are the Katakana Mountains,” she said.

“Yes.”

“That’s . . .”

“Home of the Kitsune clan. I know.” Edwyn motioned for

her to go ahead of him on the path. As they stepped out, two hooded figures joined them. Edwyn paid the men no mind, and they fell into the rear, as guards.

“This is not the place I’d wish to be,” Edwyn said. “Not now particularly, but not at any time. I know what Alvar Kitsune has done, and I count myself in the small portion of the empire that is not the least bit surprised by any of it. Not that he survived his exile in the Forest of the Dead. And not by the rumors I’ve heard, of what happened to your village and your father.”

Ashyn glanced back quickly.

“Yes, child, most of the empire may know nothing of what transpired in Edgewood, but my sources are excellent. Alvar Kitsune raised shadow stalkers to massacre your village. Is that correct?”

She nodded, her chest seizing with grief as she thought of it. Tova pushed at her hand, and she patted his head.

“I heard the story, and I did not doubt it for a heartbeat. I know exactly what sort of man Alvar Kitsune is. I’ve known for thirty summers—since he put my village to the torch.”

“What?”

Edwyn motioned for her to turn on the path ahead. When she did, he continued. “Our family originally came from a town not much bigger than your Edgewood. It was called Silvershore.”

“I’ve not heard of it.”

“You won’t. It has been erased from time and memory. An inconsequential town that fell in the conquest of the North.” Edwyn waved for her to head upward with the path. “Jiro Tatsu

and Alvar Kitsune were still young warriors, looking to make names for themselves. Fearsome warriors and closest companions, but very different men. They split their forces that day, on the former emperor's orders. Have you heard of Icewynne?"

"My father mentioned it. A pretty town on the side of a snow-covered mountain. He took my mother there when they first married."

Edwyn smiled. "Yes, I recall that. Icewynne is indeed beautiful. That is the town Jiro Tatsu conquered. He rode in, demanded their surrender, put a few objects to the sword, and captured the town. It pledged fealty to the empire, and he left it exactly as he'd found it. Over in Silvershore, Alvar Kitsune also rode in and demanded surrender. Then he put *every* object to the sword, along with a few dozen innocents as a lesson in resistance. The town begged for mercy. He accepted it and made as if to leave. I was hiding with your mother and my wife, and as he rode past, I saw him throw sorcerer's fire into the livestock enclosure. The straw and the wooden buildings caught flame, and the town burned. Then Alvar told the emperor we must have burned our own town in spite, so the emperor ordered Silvershore razed and stricken from all history books."

They climbed a particularly steep section of the path in silence, and Ashyn looked back to see if Edwyn was having difficulty, given his age, but he didn't appear to be winded or struggling. When they reached a flatter section, he continued speaking.

"When Alvar Kitsune was exiled, I was more pleased than I ought to admit. I would certainly prefer *not* to be on his

ancestral lands. However, as you may have noted, that dragon skull is embedded in the cave wall. Unmovable. This, then, has become one of our sacred places, despite the proximity to an old enemy.”

“Sacred places?”

He smiled. “More on that soon, child. For now, there is a cave opening hidden just ahead. Inside, you will find your friend.”

If Edwyn had not told her that Ronan lived, Ashyn would have believed she was viewing his corpse, laid out for her to send his spirit to the second world. He lay absolutely still on the straw-filled pallet. His brown skin looked as pale as hers. His eyes were closed and dark-lidded as if bruised. She had to take his hand to feel his pulse, and even then, the chill of his touch sent one through her. As she lowered his limp hand back to the pallet, Tova whimpered.

A woman crouched beside Ronan’s supine form. She wore a thin cloak of hemp weave. Her hood was pushed down, revealing a woman perhaps in her fourth decade, with graying yellow hair. The healer, Ashyn presumed, along with another older woman who seemed to be her assistant. But when Ashyn asked after Ronan’s condition, neither woman lifted her gaze.

“She does not speak the common language,” Edwyn said. “The North may have been conquered three decades past, but for many of the small settlements, that is their protest.”

“Not learning the empire’s language?” Ashyn said, looking over. “One would think that would be more hindrance than help.”

He shrugged. "People do what they can to retain some power when most of it has been stripped from them. I am not particularly opposed to life under the emperor. We feel he often forgets us, likely because we have little to offer but snow and ice, but he does send warriors to protect against the tribes, and wagon trains of rice to sustain us during the long winters, so I offer him my fealty and learn his language. Others do not."

Ashyn went to examine the bandages around Ronan's neck. The woman jumped then, as if to stop her, but halted at a word from Edwyn.

"Is the wound closed?" Ashyn asked.

"Yes, it has been sewn. The problem is the loss of blood."

"Then he needs fluids. Water may not replace blood, but it does aid in its replenishment."

"You know healing, child?"

"Mostly from books. Battle healing is one of a Seeker's responsibilities."

"Ah, I will admit that I know little of your position. There has never been a Seeker in the North. It is an imperial custom."

She turned, frowning. "But it's not a *custom*. Moria and I hear the second world, at least when the spirits choose to communicate. I can soothe spirits and Moria can banish them. That is not merely training."

"Perhaps, but it is not the gift of *every* twin girl either, is it? Only those the empire allows to survive."

Ashyn nodded and turned back to Ronan. The empire was a place of both kindness and cruelty. Right now, she needed to focus less on that and more on her immediate corner of it.

"Has he woken to receive liquids?" she asked.

“No, he has yet to regain consciousness. Which is the problem with replacing his fluids.”

She leaned over and laid her hand on his forehead, clammy and cold beneath her fingers.

“Ronan?” she said. “It’s Ashyn. Can you hear me?”

No response.

“If you are conscious but too weak to open your eyes, can you let me see you move?”

Still nothing.

“He is deeply unconscious,” Edwyn said. “We have not witnessed so much as a flutter of movement since he first passed out.” He said a few words in another language to the woman, and she nodded, confirming that.

“He is as well as he can be, child,” Edwyn said. “Now, if you’ll return with me to the other cave, I will answer your questions and tell you what we have planned. Then you may come back here and sit with him.”

“It’s real then,” Ashyn said, running her fingers over the eye socket of the dragon skull. It protruded from the wall, as if mounted there, but upon closer inspection, it was indeed embedded in the stone itself.

“It would be difficult to manufacture such a thing,” Edwyn said with a dry laugh. “Although, to be honest, people have tried. We’ve been summoned to verify remains of dragons, only to discover they’re bones from an ancient cave bear or even parts carved from soapstone. But something of that scale, I assure you, is impossible to fake.”

He was right. The eye socket alone was as big as her head,

and she had to reach up to touch it. The teeth were each larger than her handspan. Some were missing, and she could feel wear on the intact ones, less sharp after a lifetime of ripping apart prey. She shuddered at the thought. Moria had told her about their horrific fight with the thunder hawk, and this creature would be larger still. One chomp of its great jaws . . . Ashyn might not have her sister's imagination, but she could still picture a man sliding down that massive gullet in a single swallow.

"How old is it?" she asked.

"Ages."

Ashyn smiled. "Moria will be disappointed. They were selling dragon eggs in the city, and I could tell she was tempted. She might know they're simply pretty rocks, but still . . . the possibility . . ."

"Yes," he said, returning her smile. "That possibility keeps many a shady merchant in business. They are very pretty rocks, though. Nothing like real dragon eggs."

"There are real—?" She stopped and nodded. "Fossilized."

"You've heard of such a thing?"

"The process, yes. I grew up in the Wastes. After the volcanos erupted, the cooling lava left many petrified remains. Traders used to come and collect stone-hardened beasts to sell as monsters. Never dragon eggs, though. The stones were too dull for that. I suppose real fossilized eggs *would* look dull."

"They do, though if broken open, they are a thing of beauty. Every color, like diamonds refracting the light. Not that we would ever break an egg, but sometimes they are discovered already shattered."

“Who discovers them?”

He didn’t answer, instead walking to the skull. “Your sister is called the Keeper. Ironical, because that is her true heritage—yours and hers both. Our family’s heritage. The keepers of dragons.” He walked to the skull and touched the snout. “Keepers of memories now and keepers of bones. Or so most believe. But the truth, child? The truth is that we keep so much more.”

He ran his finger over one front fang. “You spoke earlier of your powers. Yes, you have powers over spirits, and in the empire, where spirits are the subject of religion, that is what they focus on. It is the manifestation of your connection to the imperial goddess. But there are other faces to the goddess. Sometimes she is not even a goddess but a god. A supreme power that men and women recognize as their faith tells them to.” He looked over at her. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I . . . I think so. Many people worship a deity, and you believe it is the same one, with different names and faces.”

A broad smile. “You are indeed clever, child. That is a concept rarely understood by people twice your age.”

“Perhaps it’s not so much a matter of understanding as of accepting.”

“Clever and wise. So the empire has its goddess, who rules the second world. She is also associated with dragons, particularly under the rule of the Tatsu clan.”

“Because the dragon is their totem, so it benefits the emperor to strengthen that connection.”

“Do you know where that connection comes from?” He did

not wait for her to answer. “From the North. Our goddess is the queen of dragons. And in our world, twin girls born blessed of the goddess have a special gift, beyond the ability to hear the dead.”

He took her hand then, his fingers warm and surprisingly strong as he moved her to stand with him in front of the gaping jaws, both gazing up in awe at the beast before them. Then, still holding her hand, Edwyn leaned down and whispered in her ear, “They have the power to wake dragons.”