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THE QUEEN
AND THE DAGGER

The Queen and the Dagger (A Book of Theo novella)

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The Queen and the Dagger

**By
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For Artemis

Prologue

In a distant time, those we know as animals had the gift of speech. Aktu, the goddess of all things, gave written speech to all living creations in the land of Mankahar, so they might know the power of trapped words.

But Dakus, king of those who called themselves Man, used the written word to discover how to Pacify his fellow beasts, and rob them of speech.

He did so on a mass scale, so that his kind might control and rule over others. And so the Order was established: a society of animals who vowed to fight Dakus.

Because Dakus's power was gained through a book, the animals of Mankahar reasoned that the written word must be an evil, a punishment sent to sow discord and slavery.

And so Aktu's language was banned, and those who knew how to read or write were termed "omatjes," sorcerers who should be put to death. The animals destroyed all artifacts with the written word, killed all those who practiced it, and forbade its teaching.

But language, unlike other living things, does not always die so easily.

Chapter 1

Indigo saw the wolf first.

She wasn't an alpha, but her paws were as wide as Indigo's head, her grey-flecked snout long as Indigo's arm. The wolf's belly stretched smooth and taut. Evidence of her recent meal.

Indigo flicked her long, tapered ears. Beside her, three fellow initiates crept forward in the foliage until they saw Indigo raise a cautionary paw. This was their first sighting, but they knew there must be others nearby. A female wolf did not hunt alone. Especially during the annual Run.

Indigo tried not to focus on the wolf's belly, or the conspicuous ochre staining the muzzle. The predator lay in plain sight, cleaning one paw with a languid tongue. Indigo hadn't known the slain initiate. Now she never would.

The wolf would be slower because of her meal, but only just. And her pack mates—six, if the reports were to be trusted—would be more eager now that one of them had feasted.

But where were they?

A chirrup made her hackles rise. A warning from a fellow initiate: they should skirt the wolf on the left hillock and hug the opposite side. This brought her attention to the stretch of tall grass on the far right. Everything looked clear, yet Indigo hesitated.

She could see no one, not even the seasoned Alvareth warriors who she knew were watching from a hidden vantage point. Watching and waiting, like the initiates, to see who would survive the Run, and who would fall to the wolves and go to Aktu.

Every year they gathered like this, when frosty winter gales thawed into mild breezes that no longer bit the flesh and singed the eyes. This was when young Alvareth rabbits proved themselves and came of age. A princess of Alvareth had never failed the Run, and Indigo wasn't about to be the first. Especially when she had more at stake than anyone else.

Every nerve in her itched to leap up and race down that hill, to feel the grass scrape her as she sprinted past the wolf. She saw herself flying through the far stretch of stunted growth and into the safety of the initiates' gate, a warren designed as the Run's end point. All who passed that gate became true Alvareth clan members and earned their tattoos. All who didn't became food for the wolves.

Every spring, the wolves of Blackmoon circled through this corner of their territory, and they knew the ritual as well as the rabbits. Every spring, three days after the rise of the new moon, the rabbits ran the gully known as Cragged Pass. And the wolves would be waiting. It was a time-honored tradition, a way of celebrating the cycle of life and death, a dance between hunters and fighters. Surviving the Run would mark her as adult, which meant receiving her tattoos and becoming Alvareth's queen.

The sun crept higher, making Indigo's paws itch with a fresh layer of sweat. If one of them broke cover, they'd all have to follow. Being last, and alone, would mean certain death. Indigo's nerves prickled with unease. Something felt wrong.

She saw a blur to her left. In a flash of amber and tan, an initiate burst from the grasses and streaked towards the right, away from the grooming wolf. The others followed suit, their pent-up anticipation propelling them like silent arrows over the scrub and down the slope.

Indigo scrambled over the boulder she'd been crouching behind, and after a split hesitation, veered in the opposite direction. Though they'd been taught that their strength lay in staying together, some instinct warned her away from the others.

The wolf looked up from her cleaning and stood. Indigo's blood pounded, the wind rushing through her fur. It felt good to run. From the corner of her eye, she saw dark smudges appear on the horizon, and she knew.

A trap.

The wolf threw her nose into the air and howled. And that was when Indigo's nerves turned to ice.

This was no Blackmoon wolf.

It howled wordlessly. This was a howl of primitive blood thirst, a howl without soul.

The wolves on the edge of Indigo's vision flew towards their prey. The female wolf had deliberately planted herself where the Run was easiest, leaving the right side enticingly open. The problem was, the open space bore teeth of jagged rock, slowing down anyone attempting to speed across it. The crest meant that the pack could hide downwind from view until their scout gave them the signal, and now they rushed over the edge, silent and swift.

The scout wolf came at her, jaws open in what could only be a semblance of a grin. For Indigo knew this wolf could not grin. Could not speak. Would never speak again.

Indigo could easily outrun her, and she knew the rules: outrun the wolves, do not fight them. To fight them was to tempt fate, for this was a test of speed and

strategy, not combat. But the pack was closing in on the twenty odd initiates who had chosen to run together, and these were not the ordinary wolves from Blackmoon. Perhaps they were, once. Now they were aberrations.

These were the dreaded Pacified.

A few more strides and the wolves would have the others surrounded, with no chance of escape. They would die in the jaws of these monsters, and Indigo could not think of a worse death.

She darted sideways, scanning for a weapon. Initiates went to the Run unarmed, and she longed for her familiar sword. She settled on a sharp rock the size of her paw and scooped it up. No time to think this through. She had to act if this year's Run was not to be a meaningless slaughter.

She turned, forcing her breath to slow so her arm would steady. If she missed, she would be the wolf's second course. A normal Blackmoon wolf would have hesitated at the unorthodox action. But the beast never faltered, if anything the action spurred it on. The rabbit took aim and launched the rock with all her strength. It flew wide, useless. Indigo reached for a second rock. Any rock.

The wolf was almost upon her. She smelled the blood matting the predator's fur, the reek of its breath. She took aim and threw, hard. This time the rock connected, a telltale cracking as bone fractured. The wolf grunted but didn't back down, and none of the other wolves took interest enough to abandon the main chase. Indigo burst into a sprint for the initiates' gate.

She heard the monster's breath behind her, close, eager, the bloodlust overruling any pain from the fractured leg. Indigo had lost precious time fighting. There was little hope of any of them surviving.

Something shook the ground, and then there was a snarl of fear behind her. She heard a series of pained yelps. She risked a look over her shoulder, and froze in disbelief.

A giant bear the color of night had appeared, barreling into the attacker with all his weight. The injured wolf, realizing she was outmatched, backed away, snarling in frustration. The other wolves, wary, circled with hackles raised but kept their distance.

"Kuno?" Indigo breathed. "Is that you?"

The bear towered over the wolves on his hind legs and pushed them further back. Indigo's fellow initiates huddled in the shrubs nearby, stunned at the turn of events.

"Stay down!" the bear snapped.

It *was* Kuno. She knew that voice, even after all these years. Indigo felt a mixture of relief and confusion at her old friend's appearance. She hadn't seen

him in eight seasons, perhaps more. What was he doing here? He was supposed to be with the Order, out in Mount Mahkah.

Their giant ally roared at the wolves, who had gathered in an angry knot, eyes narrowed and lips drawn back over yellowed teeth. Indigo knew that even a large bear was no match against an entire pack.

The wolves eyed the rabbits, growling and snapping their anger. One of the larger ones decided to try its luck and leaped for Kuno. The bear opened his massive arms and pulled the attacker to him, pinning the wolf's snout with one arm while crushing its torso with his other. The wolf yelped as its bones cracked, and with a twist of his boulder-sized paw the bear broke its neck. The wolf was dead before it hit the ground.

For a moment, all was still as the remaining wolves eyed their dead companion hungrily. With a few last snarls, the pack slunk away to a safe distance.

Kuno turned to Indigo and the other initiates.

"Everyone all right?"

Her companions nodded, but Indigo knew with a thundering heart that Alvareth, and her future, had just changed forever. Pacification had arrived in the north.

Chapter 2

“Indigo!”

The initiates were greeted by a milling throng of family and curiosity seekers. Indigo looked around for her older sister Borla, and spotted her approaching, waving her good arm. Borla’s twin, Dorju, followed her like a silent shadow.

The twins had the same lilac coat and green-flecked eyes as their father, but vastly differing personalities. Borla was the thinker, the reasoner. A nearly fatal fever when they were young had twisted Borla’s left paw into a stiff, curled limb that she kept tucked close to her chest. The twins shared everything, including illness. While Dorju had kept the use of all her limbs, she had paid with her voice. She had developed a way of communicating most things through her paws, but only Borla understood her all of the time.

Indigo felt the familiar admiration at seeing their wide ears, the insides decorated in the tattoos they had earned from their initiation. Though most had tried to prevent the twins from joining the Run, convinced they would fall to the wolves, Borla and Dorju had proven everyone wrong. Excitement fluttered within Indigo, for soon she would have her own markings.

“We heard what happened. Are you hurt?” Borla asked. Dorju hugged Indigo, her eyes questioning.

“We’re fine.” Indigo motioned towards Kuno, who was approaching in the distance. “You’ll never guess who saved us.”

Borla shaded her eyes with her good arm. “Is that who I think it is?”

Indigo nodded. “He’s back.”

“From the Order?” Borla glanced at Indigo. “Perhaps they are choosing an apprentice.”

Indigo was giddy at the thought. Only the best were invited to join the Order. Fascinated with the old legends of warrior queens, she had trained harder than anyone at the sword—might the Order choose her?

Kuno had left years ago with his brother for the Order’s stronghold in Mount Mahkah. He and Indigo had been close once, striking up an unlikely friendship during the summer when animals of the steppes and those living in the mountains gathered near the waters of Raven Toe. Her aunt Kalmara, now the regent, had been adamant against friendship with a meat-eater, but her mother Queen Delamar had joked that it was Indigo’s first act of diplomacy.

She'd heard nothing from Kuno since he and his brother joined the Order. But Indigo had wanted to follow them to the legendary society, ever since what happened to her mother and sister ten seasons ago.

"The queen regent wants you. Now," Borla said.

"Am I in trouble?" Tradition dictated she go directly to the ink master's warren to be tattooed after a successful Run. But this Run had been anything but traditional.

The twins glanced at each other. "Can't tell." Borla lowered her voice. "There's talk."

Indigo stopped in her tracks. "Of what?"

Borla tapped at her crooked paw. "To do with the succession."

Indigo tried to keep her expression neutral. She glanced back to see Kuno still behind them, wading through curious onlookers eager to see the bear who had saved their initiates.

The three sisters passed the performance grounds, picking up their pace, and Indigo noted the marked absence of the usual dancing and reveling that happened during the Run. The grounds had gone strangely quiet, muted to an anxious hum of murmuring voices as rabbits old and young discussed the wolves of Blackmoon. The only performer was a lone singer with a battered bandura, playing Aktu's Ballad. They walked past the small audience listening in melancholy silence.

The Urzok King Dakus,
Great was his greed,
So he enslaved all the kingdoms,
He paid Aktu no heed.

He said all in Mankahar must bow,
To birth and die by his command
Until you see what you see now,
A land of slaves beneath his hand.

Thus the Order was born,
To restore Aktu's balance
To keep Mankahar safe
And break the Urzok lance;
For did Aktu not say that all life is precious?
Did Aktu not say killing is for food or defense?
Did Aktu not say, to squander life is ignorant?

So I will fight Pacification,
I left my home and my love
To join the Order and he who leads it.
Let my grandchildren know
I stood on Aktu's side
The side of light
To topple Dakus and restore our right.

They had reached the royal warren. Indigo could hear the sounds of scuffling and the clash of metal on metal even before Borla led her and Dorju around the back, to the quadrangle behind the warren.

A sparring match was in full swing. In what appeared a grossly unfair fight, three rabbits had ganged up on a fourth: a petite sandstone figure with sharp black eyes and a dusty tunic that hid a lean, hardened body. They attacked the smaller rabbit sometimes singly, sometimes together, the clash of their swords interspersed with grunts of exertion.

A smattering of observers surrounded the spectacle: the usual guards, a few passersby curious to see royal fighting prowess.

Indigo grimaced as she and her sisters waited on the sidelines. Her aunt, the queen regent Kalmara, enjoyed public displays of physical skill much more than Indigo did. To her, they felt like a thinly veiled ploy designed to remind the queendom that its regent was powerful, vigorous, and undefeated. Kalmara loved to show off her unmarred torso—proof that no one had ever gotten close enough to her vitals to ever leave a mark. Her compact stature and quick movements with the sword had earned her the nickname “the Bird”, and watching her fight it was easy to see why. Kalmara didn't move with her sword, she flew. She was light, fast, and impossible to catch, earning her the undisputed title of best sword wielder in the seven queendoms.

Kalmara parried a thrust, then ducked a swing from an opponent who tried to surprise her from behind. She brought the flat of her sword down on the first attacker's back, sending him sprawling into the grass.

“That is all for today,” she said, clapping her paws together. The three sparring rabbits picked themselves up, clapped their paws in reply, and bowed as they left the quadrangle. Several onlookers rushed forward to pay their respects. Kalmara said a word or two to be polite, but soon motioned for a guard to escort them away. The spectacle was meant to impress, and having done so, the audience was expected to disperse.

While the last stragglers were herded away, Kalmara handed her sword to a

waiting servant, while another hurried forward to drape the royal robes around the queen regent's shoulders.

"Tell me about the wolf."

Indigo hadn't expected her aunt to be so abrupt, to not even apologize for delaying her from her markings. She decided on directness in return.

"They were not normal."

"You'll need to be more specific, Bobo," Kalmara pressed, tying her robes with a swift, efficient knot.

Indigo hated her aunt using her nickname. Only her mother and closest friends had ever used it. "They were unliving."

"You can't know that," the queen regent said, as if speaking to a kit. "Are you sure it wasn't just your nerves? The Run is a thrilling but also stressful experience. We'd understand if that were the case."

Indigo shook her head. "I know what I saw and heard. Those wolves were soulless. They've been Pacified."

Kalmara gave her a sharp look, but her expression softened as Indigo heard footfalls behind her. Indigo knew without looking that it was her father.

"Your daughter thinks the Blackmoon wolves have been pacified, husband."

Indigo turned. Lukkas's tan and lilac fur shone thick and silky, his whiskers barely streaked with any white.

Her aunt and father cast meaningful glances at one another. Glances he had once cast at Indigo's mother, the former queen. She still sometimes had trouble believing her mother was gone and her aunt had married her father within a moon. It was her right as the temporary queen to wed the widowed consort, but it never sat well with Indigo.

"Perhaps it is a good thing, this destruction of our enemies," Kalmara said finally.

Indigo wrestled her shock. "A good thing? The wolves are not our enemies, they are part of Aktu's balance! The enemy is the one who is turning them into these ... things. We should support the Order, Aunt Kalmara. If all the queendoms joined together we could—"

"Indigo," her father interjected. "The regent has been very clear that Alvareth cannot be drawn into war."

"The *regent*," Indigo said deliberately, "did not see these wolves. The Pacification is coming north, and we're running out of places to hide."

"So far this is purely rumor," Kalmara replied, taking a cup of water from her servant and downing it. "The young are so easily swayed by rumor."

A sentry entered the quadrangle, confusion and timidity etched on his face. "Your Regency, there is a bear named Kuno to see you."

“Tell him we’ll receive him shortly.”

The sentry nodded and left.

“If you don’t believe me, ask Kuno,” Indigo urged as Kalmara walked past her.

“Kuno joined the Order, did he not?” Kalmara shook her head. “He will say anything to persuade Alvareth to go to war.”

Kalmara evidently hadn’t changed her stance towards the bear. As Indigo and her sisters followed the queen regent out the quadrangle and towards the front of the royal warren, she wondered whether her aunt was right. Was that why Kuno had returned? To persuade Alvareth to fight for the Order? He had refused to answer her questions on the journey back from the Run, saying there was no point explaining something twice. But she’d gladly pledge Alvareth to the Order, once she was queen. Then she’d become one of the Alvareth warrior queens of legend, those defenders of the steppes whose deeds lived on in song.

In the square outside the royal warren, Kuno sat a respectful distance south of the entrance, as was humble. Normally a guest would stand in the presence of royalty, but Kuno’s towering height made it more respectful to sit.

“Welcome, Kuno of Hegg,” Kalmara said, clapping her paws in greeting. “I hear you saved our initiates and my beloved niece from death.”

The bear grunted. “By Aktu’s grace. She obviously did not intend to see Alvareth’s new queen die in the jaws of Pacified wolves.”

“Obviously,” Kalmara agreed. “However, was it just fate that brought you back to these lands after all these years? Or are you here on the Order’s business?”

Kuno glanced at Indigo. “The Urzoks are preparing to push northeast towards Mount Mahkah. Twelve warriors have been chosen to join the Order and lead the armies.”

Kalmara didn’t look at her niece. “And one of those twelve is Indigo, I gather?”

Indigo’s heart hammered as the bear nodded. Her future seemed to have come into focus, clear and brilliant as a guiding star. She would lead the rabbits of Alvareth to Mount Mahkah, and they would fight the Urzoks. She would become a famed warrior queen and avenge her mother and sister.

“I was sent to attend the crown princess’ ascension to the throne.”

“After which you would persuade her to bring Alvareth to the Order’s aid, am I right?”

“That would be a choice for Queen Indigo.”

“The queendom will support the Order wholeheartedly,” Indigo cut in before noticing Borla’s warning look. Borla had always advised her to keep those

intentions quiet, but now that she was practically queen she would have to make her policies known.

Kalmara twitched her nose in thought. “Of course, that will be your ultimate decision when you are queen, Indigo. But for the time being, my regency will have to continue. At least until next year.”

Indigo thought she had misheard. Kuno’s eyes narrowed, and Borla and Dorju both looked grim.

“The law dictates that I take the throne after the Run.” Indigo tried to keep her voice even. This was not the time to lose her temper.

Kalmara smiled indulgently. “Of course, Bobo. But technically you didn’t pass the Run.” She motioned towards the bear. “Kuno saved you, all of you. Therefore you haven’t completed the Run, for tradition requires that you survive unarmed and unaided.”

Indigo ground her teeth. “The wolves were Pacified. The Run wasn’t fair.”

“I agree,” the regent replied. “The Run wasn’t fair. Which is why I can’t say that you’ve earned your markings, and therefore you have not, according to Alvareth law, come of age.”

Indigo’s stomach lurched. Kuno tried to keep his face impassive, but she could tell that he was caught off guard, that the Order’s plans had included her becoming queen. She turned to Borla, searching for her sister’s support. If anyone knew the law, it was Borla. No one had been more surprised than Indigo when Kalmara named the youngest as Crown Princess, skipping both Borla and Dorju because of their perceived disabilities. And even though the decision was against her interests, Borla had acquiesced to the obscure law Kalmara cited: regents had the power to change the succession if they deemed the rightful heir physically incapable of ruling. Kalmara had argued that Alvareth couldn’t be ruled by—and Indigo’s temper flared every time she thought of her aunt’s words—a “cripple or a mute.” Some might have fought this decision, or turned against their chosen sibling, but neither Borla nor Dorju ever displayed any resentment towards Indigo.

“Is this true? Can she do this?”

Borla looked from Indigo to Kalmara. “It’s never been done. The Run has never been challenged. But yes, it’s within Alvareth law if the regent believes the initiation is invalid.”

Kalmara turned to Kuno. “If the Order has named Indigo then she has the right to leave with you. But I’m afraid she will not be queen until next year’s Run.”

Indigo moved to speak, but Borla gave her a warning shake of her head. Indigo forced herself to bite back her protest.

“And if the Blackmoons do not return next year?” Kuno growled. “If the Pacification has wiped them out?”

Kalmara swept a tattooed ear over one shoulder. “That seems highly unlikely. I’m sure this year was bad luck, and there’s a simple explanation for why the Blackmoons weren’t there.”

“What if Kuno’s right?” Indigo cut in, unable to heed Borla’s advice. “If the Blackmoons are no more, there will be no more Runs. No more initiation. You cannot argue that I stay a kit forever!”

Her father put a placating paw on her shoulder. “No one is saying that, daughter. But perhaps it would help if we knew for certain what happened to the Blackmoons.” He turned to the queen regent. “What say you, Kalmara? Perhaps we should send a party to seek out the Blackmoons, find out if it’s true.”

Kalmara seemed to ponder this for a moment before nodding. “Wise counsel, husband.” Indigo’s father straightened with pride while she boiled with anger. Couldn’t he see how her aunt treated him like a plaything? “The best course is to find out the truth of the matter, and then we can decide how to handle the princess’s initiation.” Kalmara turned to Indigo and her sisters. “Borla, Dorju, go with your sister. Find the wolves of Blackmoon and see if they are indeed all Pacified.”

“And if they are?” Kuno countered.

“Then I’ll have to consult the other queendoms. Though we all have separate sovereignty, our initiation ceremony is shared, and we’ll have to agree on a fitting test for our youths,” the regent replied. “These are tumultuous times. We must proceed with caution.” She looked pointedly at Indigo. “Not give way to hot-headed youngsters.”

Or give up the throne without a fight.

Though she was smart enough not to voice it, Indigo knew Kuno shared the same thought.

Chapter 3

With the word that there would be no initiates this night, an already nervous queendom was forced to cancel the Run Feast. Families gathered in their own warrens, discussing the day's news, their tables and larders overflowing with food that would now have to be hastily preserved if it was not to go to waste.

Indigo had met with Kuno and Borla to discuss how and where they would look for the Blackmoons. They decided Kuno would travel to meet with the other queendoms and try to convince them to support the Order. Once they'd hammered out their plan, Indigo retired to her warren to arrange her traveling supplies. But also to think.

How many times had Borla hinted at this? That Kalmara wouldn't relinquish the regency easily. But Indigo had refused to believe that her aunt—the same aunt who'd always coddled her when she was young—would deliberately keep her from the throne. They'd certainly disagreed about policy, a rift that had widened with the years, but Indigo had never imagined her aunt would actually oppose her. Not only oppose her, but prevent her from gaining her tattoos, a rite every rabbit looked forward to. The thought of not attaining her tattoos was almost more fearful than Pacification. To come of age without one's markings was like having no name, no status. For once she was glad that her mother was not here, so that she wouldn't have to witness her daughter being denied not just her throne, but her very identity.

Her father had tried to reassure her that Kalmara was simply following law and looking out for her best interests. Better that Kalmara objected to the succession, her father argued, and made sure it was iron clad, than for one of the other queendoms to question it and force her from the throne. Though every queendom had the right to name their own ruler, the other queens had veto power in extreme circumstances. Not to mention they could also use their intricate political alliances with each other to make Indigo's rule difficult: barring or taxing trade, refusing to accept Alvareth's royal sons as bridegrooms. And her aunt had grown used to control in the ten seasons since Indigo's mother, the former queen, had died.

Thoughts of her mother and the canceled feast made Indigo think of the last time—the only other time—a Run Feast had been canceled. Another night when her world had changed irrevocably.

* * *

The knick caught her on the chin.

“Ow!”

“Your mind is at the ink master’s tent, yes?” Kalmara pointed her blade at Indigo. “The sword is a jealous mistress—she demands utter concentration.”

Indigo rubbed at the scratch. The sparring quadrangle was deserted, as everyone was at the Run feast or waiting to see the initiates come out of the ink master’s with their new markings. “Do you think Azel’s tattoos are finished?”

Kalmara attacked, forcing Indigo to raise her sword and parry several thrusts. “Focus, Indigo. A good fighter must always have a plan. The best ones plan at least five moves in advance.” She lunged, landing a slap against Indigo’s thigh. “If I come at you from the left, what am I trying to do?”

Indigo fended the upcoming blows, and panted, “Drive me to the right?”

Kalmara nodded. “Good. There’s hope for you yet, Bobo.”

Indigo grinned. Her aunt immediately swooped in, and with a deft flick of the wrist sent Indigo’s sword flying to the grass.

“But remember: never let your guard down.” Kalmara picked up the fallen weapon and held it out.

“Why do you only teach me?” Indigo asked. “Didn’t Borla or Dorju want to learn?” She was proud that her aunt would train her at the sword, for everyone knew the Bird’s reputation. She had no other students except Indigo, whose constant appeals for lessons had finally worn the Bird down. But Indigo suddenly wondered whether others hadn’t pleaded just as hard.

Kalmara sheathed her blade. “I’m allowed to have a favorite niece, aren’t I?”

“Borla says you don’t teach them because you look down on them,” Indigo said, frowning. “For what the fever did.”

Kalmara sighed. “Aktu is cruel, Indigo. Cripples and mutes don’t make rulers or sword wielders. Those two are better off learning other skills.”

“But what about the story of the West Wind and the Sun? Strength isn’t everything.”

Her aunt laughed. “Your mother still tells you that fable?” She shook her head. “In this world, power comes from either a strong paw or a crown. Nothing else.”

From the quadrangle markers, a cough cut into the conversation.

It was Borla. One look at her expression, and her self-consciously tucked arm, and Indigo knew her sister had heard everything. There was an awkward silence.

“Azal’s nearly done,” Borla said, quiet. “You coming, Indigo?”

Indigo nodded, confused and suddenly eager to get away from Kalmara. She hung up her practice sword on its customary rack, and hurried after Borla.

Her sister said nothing as they walked, and Indigo couldn’t think of the right words to defend Kalmara or herself. They joined the milling throng outside the ink master’s warren, finding their queen mother, Delamar, waiting with Dorju. Indigo’s discomfort regarding Borla gave way to excitement. She had been imagining Azal’s new markings with envy, wondering what her favorite sister would look like with the rich blue swirls covering her ears.

“Don’t fidget, Bobo.” Her mother’s quiet voice forced her to stay still, even though she wanted to run into the ink master’s warren and see the process for herself.

“Sorry, mama.”

“It’ll be your turn soon enough.”

Indigo pouted. She and Azal had ten seasons between them—an eternity, as far as Indigo was concerned. But her mother always seemed able to read her mind, a trait that both awed and exasperated Indigo. Delamar was the longest ruling queen in living memory, and Indigo knew her own existence had been a small miracle—her mother having birthed her when most thought her well beyond her prime. Indigo forced away thoughts of the day her mother would go to Aktu. Her clan, her world, was safe as long as her mother was in it.

The flap to the ink master’s abode parted, and Azal appeared, ears still wet and swollen. Indigo and her sisters swarmed her in an instant, jostling past the other initiates eagerly waiting their turn for the inking. All were full of words of praise, except Dorju, who hugged Azal in silent congratulations.

“They’re beautiful!”

“Look at the detail!”

“Can I touch them?”

Queen Delamar waded in, admonishing her daughters. “The blood hasn’t dried. You don’t want to give your crown princess ill luck, do you?”

Azal smiled at their mother, proud yet shy at the same time, before catching Indigo’s eye and winking. Despite the age difference, Indigo felt closest to her eldest sibling. Indigo’s mother doted on her, but she didn’t always have time for her children. Azal had brought Indigo under her wing, recognizing a kindred spirit. They both took after their mother: thick, unruly fur that looked like churned milk when brushed and oiled; the queen’s graceful nose and majestic, wide ears. The similarities didn’t stop at the physical, either: they both had stubborn wills, a fiery appetite for fighting, and an inflexible sense of justice.

They made their way, chattering and laughing, to the royal warren where

Azel's patterning feast was already waiting. Indigo and her sisters rarely had a chance to dine with their mother and immediate family, but it was not every day the crown princess came of age. The mood had been joyous, festive.

It was the last time she had ever felt that way.

** * **

The one thing keeping them from abandoning all decorum at the feast table was the presence of the stranger. Indigo noticed him as soon as they entered—he was the only unfamiliar face sitting opposite her mother's sister, Kalmara, and Indigo's father.

Though the spring brought many travelers of different stripes through the steppes, no one could remember seeing a muskrat before. This one was wiry, with a shock of hair that was more mane than fur. His gnarled paws betrayed an age his eyes didn't share, and though he tended to fat he also carried scars that spoke of battle: a puckered ridge under his ear that was unmistakably made by a blade, and sinewy forearms that didn't fit those of a mere traveling storyteller. He had an aura of mystery, of contradictions.

Which was why he had been invited to dine with the queens at their annual Run Feast. The guest had not only brought news of the outside world but also an appetite befitting a muskox rather than a muskrat: bowls of wild-onion stew and patties of spiced rhubarb had little chance to cool on the dining carpet before disappearing.

Sitting next to him, Indigo had the closest view of his manners, or lack thereof. His gluttony was oddly fascinating, but not as fascinating as the short blade that winked from his belt every time his jacket slid back. From the glimpses she caught, the scabbard looked like hide. Had he killed a beast to make the blade's home? The thought made her shiver.

The muskrat polished off a flagon of barley beer before shoving the empty vessel towards the nearest attendant for refilling.

"You have impeccable timing." Her aunt Kalmara eyed the guest with distaste. "Our spring rites mean we have food for all."

The muskrat helped himself to another round of barley dumplings. "Travel is hard work, as your folk must know."

Queen Delamar smiled. "Our nomadic traditions have honed us. Besides, it helps us evade the two-legged ones."

The muskrat nodded, still chewing. "Wise of you. Though it won't work."

Kalmara frowned. "Why not?"

The muskrat eyed her, amused. "Have you no concept of the Urzoks?"

Kalmara flushed at the muskrat's condescending tone before the queen jumped in to diffuse the tension. "My sister, the royal advisor, means that we feel the queendom is safe as long as we keep moving. The Urzoks have taken many lands to the south, but they now have more than enough to support their kind."

The muskrat swallowed a mouthful of dumpling and looked at the faces around him. Indigo snuck another glance at the short blade. It was most definitely encased in hide. Buffalo? Horse, maybe. And the hilt was inlaid with a gold pattern. "They want more than to just support their kind. Much more. You're doomed if you don't see that."

"It's unlucky to speak of death at the spring rites," Azel said.

The muskrat turned as if seeing her for the first time. "Forgive my callousness, Princess, I'll rephrase: if you believe that, you're blind as dead moles in a tar pit."

"You came from the south, then? Where the wars are fiercest?" Lukkas poured the muskrat more beer and tried to change the subject.

"South as you can go." The muskrat watched the refilling and grunted in reproach when Lukkas stopped before the brim.

"You mean as far as the sea?" Indigo tore herself away from secretly eyeing the guest's blade. From what she'd heard, no one could cross and re-cross Urzok lands so unscathed. Though she'd only seen an Urzok once, she knew their reputation. Two-legged, furless animals that called themselves Man. They didn't believe in the rituals or sanctity of Aktu, and rumor spoke of the farms they built: prisons where they caged and bred captives for food and clothing, the way some in the south farmed corn or wheat. Alvareth, Indigo knew, had always advocated a policy of avoidance. Push north and east, deeper into the steppes and away from the Urzoks, who seemed more interested in the rich pastureland to the south anyhow, as that was more fertile ground for their farms.

"The sea! Now there's beauty that'll bring tears to the eyes," the muskrat said with genuine wistfulness.

"And have the Urzoks taken that over as well?" the queen asked, sipping at her barley beer.

"They have their ships."

"Ships?" Indigo sounded out the unfamiliar word.

The muskrat cupped his paws. "Wood. Planked together, like so. It can float out on the water. Carry hundreds of them at once."

"But ... are there lands beyond the sea?" Being landlocked on the steppes made the sea a thing of myth. Anything beyond it was incomprehensible, as remote as the moon.

"But of course there are, Princess," the muskrat said, as if addressing the

dim witted. "I've seen them."

Indigo could tell everyone else was just as incredulous.

"So if they can tame the sea, why would the Urzoks push this far north?" Kalmara challenged.

"Because they're Urzoks. That's what they do." The guest slurped noisily at a bowl of stew, pulling at his whiskers to remove a stray slice of onion. "Mark me, it's not a question of if they come this far, it's when."

"You are a gloomy guest to have at the Rites," Kalmara remarked.

The muskrat laughed, tossing out some snide remark. As the conversation turned to the details of the Run and who had distinguished themselves the most, Indigo looked back at the blade and its gold inlay.

And that's when she noticed it: the design was unlike any she'd seen. Designs had repeating shapes in a predictable order, but this was more like a circle of scratchings, marching in a straight line across the hilt.

She reached for it.

A hairy paw gripped her wrist with the strength of a wolf's jaws. She yelped despite herself.

"Careful, lass," the muskrat growled, his voice low. "Touching sharp objects gets you cut."

"Is that an Urzok knife?" She found herself whispering, even though it was the muskrat who had trespassed.

The guest grinned, revealing sharp teeth. "It's much more ancient than the Urzoks, lass. More ancient than any of us."

"It's Aktu's language, isn't it?" She knew the punishment for possessing such things. It was the only offense worse than murder: blasphemy against Aktu by using her language could bring divine punishment on an entire clan. Would he dare harm her here, surrounded by family, in the middle of her queendom?

He regarded her for a moment, eyes hard. "I hear you're clever with the sword. Here's a lesson for you, lass. Always know who you're fighting. You don't want to stab a straw target only to find you've stuck a bull, you know my meaning?"

She hesitated, but something dark and savage in his murky eyes made her nod.

His stern expression dissolved into a smile with no warmth. "Now be a good lass and pass the barley bread."

* * *

Later, after the feasting had ended and the dancers and bonfires were

winding down, Kalmara entered the royal warren. She gave Azel and Indigo distracted smiles before turning to Delamar and Lukkas. "My queen, may we speak?"

They shared a look before the queen nodded to her husband. "I will see you in the morning."

Indigo thought her father hesitated before he kissed the queen and left. Indigo went to follow, knowing there'd be games and candied gooseberries back at the celebrations, but her mother gestured with one paw. "Stay, Bobo. You should learn how the queen and her advisor work together."

Kalmara smiled. "Why trouble your youngest with such boring matters, my queen sister? Azel will have myself or Borla as advisor when the time comes. I'm sure Indigo would prefer to join the festivities."

Kalmara had always coddled her, excusing her from onerous chores. And Indigo often took advantage of it.

Her mother turned to her. "Your choice, daughter."

Indigo hesitated. She'd never been asked to join any meetings before. Something told her it would disappoint her mother if she refused, so she took a seat to her mother's left. Azel joined her.

The queen smiled approval. "Speak, sister."

"We should rid ourselves of this hairy rat as soon as possible. Tonight."

Indigo thought about the short blade. Had Kalmara found out?

The queen frowned. "It's bad luck to turn guests away during the Spring Rites."

Kalmara wrinkled her nose. "Even so, he is a potential danger. There's talk of a powerful omatje who escaped the Purges, who is trying to flee to the north."

Indigo felt a nervous jolt.

The queen shook her head. "Impossible. Omatjes have been wiped out."

Indigo thought of the sword, of the scratchings on it. Had she truly been sitting next to an omatje? The thought was both thrilling and terrifying.

"We can't take the risk," Kalmara argued. "The law demands death."

"It is an even worse omen to shed blood during the Rites," the queen mused. She turned to Azel. "What is your opinion, daughter?"

"How do we know he is the omatje they speak of?"

"Because of his short blade," Indigo blurted. Delamar, Kalmara, and Azel all turned to look at her in surprise. "He has a dagger with the Forbidden Language on it. I saw it. At the feast."

Kalmara's usual indulgent smile turned cool. "Why didn't you mention this?"

Indigo had no good reply. Why hadn't she spoken earlier? Had she been too

curious about the dagger and its exquisite crafting? Part of her, she realized, had been hoping to be able to examine the blade again.

“That doesn’t mean he’s an omatje,” the queen pointed out. “He may have found the weapon and kept it, not knowing. I wouldn’t even know how to recognize an omatje, would you?”

“Ones who know Aktu’s Forbidden Language are skilled at deception,” Kalmara said. “If we shelter him, who knows what wrath we’ll bring upon ourselves?”

“And if we turn him away?” The queen cocked one ear. “A dangerous omatje would likely retaliate if we refuse him basic hospitality. If we allow him to stay the night he will be on his way in the morning, and we will not have offended Aktu by refusing a guest during Spring Rites.”

“This is a mistake, sister,” Kalmara warned.

“Duly noted.” The queen’s tone ended the discussion.

Kalmara swiveled her ears and bowed. “I have heard you, my queen.” She turned and left, letting the door covering slap shut behind her.

The queen sighed, turning to Azel. “Always listen to your advisor, daughter, but make up your own mind. If you are too easily swayed, you will become the grass underfoot instead of the wind that shapes it.”

* * *

The morning after Azel’s patterning, the queendom buzzed with news of the omatje’s disappearance.

He had fled, before Kalmara’s guards could catch and kill him. Rumors leaped from ear to ear about his dark arts and the taboo script they’d found on the insides of his discarded clothing. But none of those rumors were true. The only truth was that the queen and Kalmara spent the morning locked in heated argument, the queen furious that Kalmara had disobeyed her by secretly launching a pre-dawn raid on the muskrat. Borla, Dorju, and Indigo had taken turns trying to eavesdrop through a hole in the warren, until Azel found them and ordered them back to their respective lessons.

Though the festivities continued that night, a dark cloud descended over the queen and Kalmara. Each refused to speak to the other despite Lukkas’s attempts to melt the tension. The queen was short even with Indigo, which stung her more than a slap.

The celebratory mood destroyed, the queen retired early, while Kalmara left as soon as decorum allowed. Indigo regretted mentioning the blade, realizing it had caused a rift between her mother and aunt. Where was the muskrat now, she

wondered? And what was the story behind that dagger?

After the last dumplings had been eaten and the bonfires had all been buried beneath blankets of ash, Indigo still couldn't sleep. The gentle snores of her twin sisters usually didn't bother her, as she had grown accustomed to their rhythms. She knew it wasn't the barley ale either, for her head didn't feel heavy—simply unable to slide into rest. She kept thinking about the muskrat. And that blade.

She sighed, realizing sleep was not going to revisit her, and debated walking to Azel's warren. She'd be waking her sister, but it wouldn't be the first time. Since she was a little kit, she'd sneak to Azel's whenever she had a nightmare or turned restless. The crown princess was not allowed to sleep with her other siblings and had her own warren, but she never told on her youngest sister.

Indigo slipped her arm out from underneath Borla's and rose in the dark. She pulled on a pair of boots, threw a cape over herself, and stepped out into the dry night air.

The steppe, so warm and sun baked during the day, turned windswept and chilling come night. The moon was low, preparing to give way to the sun. She breathed the cold, pre-dawn air before beginning the familiar tread toward her sister's warren.

The royal warrens were arranged in a circle around the queen's, with the eldest daughter's to her direct east—the direction of light and new life, the heir who would see a new day. The queen's husband lived to the south of the queen, to show that he and his servants were below her. The west was the direction of the setting sun, of endings, and was where all the other royal children and relatives were housed. The north, the direction of the ancestors, was kept for the prayer house and the Holy One, as only Aktu was above a queen.

As Indigo walked between the royal warrens, her breath formed clouds in the cold that blew back against her. She smiled at the memories the quadrangle brought. This had been her spring playground for as long as she could remember. The landscape might change as they moved camps with the seasons, but this quadrangle, always formed by its familiar dwellings, remained constant.

As she approached her mother's warren, she slowed. Where were the usual guards who kept watch? They must have left to relieve themselves. But why hadn't they taken turns?

She stopped. The entry flap to her mother's warren was unstaked. In Indigo's warren, they always kept the flap open a crack to allow fresh air through, but Delamar guarded her privacy religiously.

Something prickled at the base of her neck.

"Mama?" Indigo called, softly. She pushed the hanging aside and stepped in. The first thing she noticed was the silence. It wasn't the silence of sleep. For

sleep, Indigo knew, was a noisy affair, everyone prone to their own medley of breaths, snores, and restless shifting. This silence was oppressive and assaulted her with the scent of metal left in the rain.

Indigo moved further into the warren, letting her eyes adjust to the gloom. Her mother's blanket had slipped to the ground from her pallet of grass and lay like a puddle near one outstretched arm.

"Mama?" Indigo whispered, creeping forward. She reached down to feel for the blanket and froze.

Her paws closed not on wool but wet, cooling liquid. It soaked into her fur, crawled beneath her nails.

Blood.

She knew from the scent, from the feel, that it could only be blood. She grabbed Delamar by the shoulders, felt the limpness in the body even before she brought her mother's face close to hers. Her stomach twisted as her mother's head rolled limp—horribly limp—onto the bed.

She didn't know she was screaming until the guards came rushing, the dawn light pouring in with them. She didn't know she was crying, for all she saw was her mother's slack face staring back at her, the blood that had turned the queen's bed into a crimson cradle, and the dagger—slick and wet—that lay discarded in one corner, gold script circling its hilt like a snake around its prey.

Chapter 4

Indigo stared at what was left of the carcass. A bloody mess spilled from the mangled fur where the wolf's throat had been, and flies swarmed around the open mouth and darkened tongue.

She forced herself not to think of her mother's throat, the gash in it, or of Azel, who had been similarly killed that same night. The murder of Alvareth's queen and heir meant Kalmara was made temporary queen regent. Indigo, fourth in line, was named crown princess. And now, ten seasons later, she was standing over a dead wolf, looking for proof of Pacification.

Next to her, Dorju used the edge of her bow to lift one of the wolf's forelegs, which was noticeably crooked. She looked over at Indigo, questioning.

Indigo nodded. "It's the same one." It felt odd to see the lifeless body of the she-wolf that only a week ago had threatened her on the Run. Wolves ate rabbits. It was a rare rabbit that could boast of killing a wolf, even indirectly. But she didn't feel like boasting.

"Eating their own kind," Borla said in disgust. "If that's not proof they're Pacified, I don't know what is."

"Are you sure?" Indigo asked.

Dorju hunkered down and pointed at the throat.

Borla nodded. "The wolves have no enemies here. And you see the way the neck has been ripped? It's a wolf's doing. They killed and ate her because she was slowing down the pack."

Indigo grimaced. To kill one's own kind was against the laws of Aktu. To eat them was even worse. The wolves of Blackmoon would never do such a thing. But an unliving wolf, one who had been Pacified by the Urzoks? That was an entirely different matter. Indigo imagined the Pacification sweeping through her family, her friends. A sickening coldness settled in her belly.

"I'm going to bury her," Indigo said, untying her sword from her back and setting it aside.

Dorju looked surprised, but Borla nodded. "You want help?"

Indigo shook her head. "I owe her this."

Dorju squinted up at the morning sun, then made a sign at her twin, who said, "Dorju's right, you better hurry. Another morning's heat on her and your nose will fall off your face." Borla walked around the body, examining the ground. "The trail's half washed away, what with the rains last night."

“Do you think Kalmara will accept this as proof?” Indigo asked, gesturing at the wolf.

Borla shook her head. “What’s to say they didn’t kill her over some disagreement and the carrion ate her?” She paused, then voiced the thought that had plagued Indigo the last three days they had been tracking the wolves. “What are you going to do if we can’t find proof?”

She knew Borla also sensed a trap. Kalmara was demanding evidence that the Run would never be possible. If they couldn’t prove it, Kalmara would simply remain regent and force her to do the Run next year. But if they did prove it, and Alvareth’s traditional rite of passage couldn’t continue, what would replace it? How would Indigo be recognized as being of age and gain the throne?

“The queendoms will come up with an alternative.”

“Kalmara will do her best to make that alternative near impossible.” Again Borla voiced Indigo’s worry. “Alvareth is by far the most influential queendom. If she says you have to build a warren out of sunlight, there’ll be few who will argue.”

“There are other initiates involved, remember. They wouldn’t let her do that.” She tested the dirt with one foot. Spring had softened the surface, but not the ground soil. It would be hard digging. “You should see if you can find the rest of them. I’ll catch up to you.”

Borla frowned. “And leave you alone?”

Indigo knew Borla was simply looking out for her, a habit from being the elder sister, but the offer of chaperoning still grated. “I’ll be fine. Go.”

“The tracks head southwest, from what I can tell. Perhaps they’re headed for Raven Toe.”

Borla was probably right. Raven Toe was where the Alva River met the Borak, forming a lush three-pronged delta where bison, long-horned deer, and horses gathered at dusk to drink. A perfect hunting ground for a pack of rogue wolves.

“I’ll meet you at the delta, if not before,” Indigo said. Her sisters hugged her and then disappeared into the surrounding scrub, letting the usual sounds of the steppes enclose her with the she-wolf’s corpse.

* * *

The dream was always the same.

Her mother was walking towards her out of a dark cave that curved into the ground like a bottomless throat. She looked as beautiful as ever and wore her crimson queen’s mantle. Indigo stared, relief flooding her. Her mother was alive.

She was here.

“My little one,” her mother said, holding out her arms. Indigo leaned into her, breathing in the comforting warmth, the scent of sage, smoke, and wild heather. Delamar wrapped her in the mantle, sheltering them both, and Indigo felt as if she were a small kit again, when her mother occasionally allowed her into her bed during the dry lightning storms of summer that lashed the brittle air. Her mother would tell her stories until she fell asleep: stories of Jasper the Trickster, or the cunning West Wind, who wooed his bride by chasing clouds across the sun’s face, and so convinced her he was the more powerful.

“My little one,” her mother said again, “you must go back. You can’t stay.”

“But you’re here.” That was, for now, all Indigo cared about. She wouldn’t think of Azel. It hurt too much. As long as she had her mother, that was enough. She wouldn’t ask for anything else ever again.

“Aktu’s land is not for you. Not yet,” her mother whispered. “I’ve seen what lies ahead for you: you must find the omatje.”

“I don’t want to.” Indigo dug in deeper, tightening her arms.

“You must. Be the wind that shapes Alvareth, not the grass trodden underfoot.” She heard her mother’s voice in her ear but realized she couldn’t feel her anymore. She was holding nothing but the mantle, its fabric stained in blood.

“Wake up, little Indigo. Find the omatje.”

* * *

Snap.

Indigo resisted the urge to rush up and bolt. She forced her eyes to remain closed, to let her nose and ears do the work for her.

Judging by the light seeping through her lids, it was close to noon. Despite her exhaustion after little sleep during their hunt for the wolves, and then spending all morning digging the grave, she had said the customary prayers over the mound. Then she had decided to shut her eyes—only for a few moments—before she set off to join her sisters.

Snap.

She could smell it now, the clear, overpowering musk of wolf. Her heart set off like a panicked bird, and she felt as she did at the Run: trapped. She knew her best defense was to stay still. Although she’d been foolish enough to fall into a deep sleep, she’d been cautious enough to hide herself in a nearby thicket under her brown cloak so that she blended into her surroundings.

She cracked one eye open and peered through the tangle of branches. A set of wide paws, nails chipped and discolored, were visible just at the edge of the

freshly turned earth. A snout came into view as the wolf—it was definitely a wolf—sniffed deeply at the grave and pawed at the dirt.

Indigo's fear dissolved into anger. She hadn't labored all morning to have one of these unliving monsters come and dig up the body. Though the smart thing would have been to quietly back out of her hiding place—for she had the advantage of being downwind, but that could change—she couldn't let this wolf desecrate the new grave. Her paw strayed to the scabbard next to her and she touched the reassuring bulk of her sword. She could have it free within a breath, steal from the thicket in two or three if she was slow. After that, she'd have to decide between nicking a tendon or sinking the weapon somewhere more vital.

She inhaled and drew her sword. She slid, silent, until she was in the open, just behind the newcomer, whose snout still probed the fresh earth. She pushed herself to her feet and rushed the wolf with sword raised.

She realized in the blink it took her to cross the space that she had misjudged. Focused on staying silent, she had failed to notice the shift in the wind. In the time it took to draw her sword and get to her feet, the wind had veered, sending her scent directly to the wolf. She realized it in the way he—for it was a he, and an alpha at that—turned towards her, expectant and ready.

So fast that she barely saw him move, the wolf was on her. She had no chance to bring her sword into play before he knocked her to the ground, pinning her with his wide grey paws and baring his yellowed fangs in her face. She lay on her back, rigid with fear, ribs screaming under the monster's weight.

So this is what death looks like. She forced herself to look it in the eyes.

"You are far from home, rabbit."

She blinked, her terror momentarily replaced by confusion.

"Get gone, child," the wolf growled. "Before what happened to her happens to you."

He backed off, but his eyes never left her. Indigo sat up, rubbing her bruised arms.

"Are you a Blackmoon?"

A look of sadness creased his face. She noticed the loose skin around his ribs, the gauntness of his muzzle. He had missed many meals. Unusual for spring.

"I'm *the* Blackmoon, rabbit." He motioned at her sword. "Take it. But use it on me and I will send you to Aktu."

She stood, making no move towards her weapon. "What do you mean, you're 'the' Blackmoon?"

He gave her a cold, predatory smile. "I'm the only wolf of Blackmoon left. The others...." His eyes wandered towards the grave, and she didn't need him to complete the sentence.

“How?”

The wolf glared at her, bitter. “What does it matter? They’re gone. Might as well be dead. They’d be better dead, truth be told.”

Indigo cautiously picked up her sword and sheathed it. “If the Pacification is coming north, we need to know.”

The wolf sat, studying her for a moment. “You’re a royal.”

“I thought that’s why you didn’t eat me.”

He flashed her a bitter grin. “I’ve been surrounded by the Pacified for so long, it’s nice to see someone who speaks. Even if that someone is usually food.”

An idea struck her. “Then help save others like us,” she said.

The wolf’s eyes narrowed. “How?”

Chapter 5

As she expected, she met a great deal of resistance.

A Blackmoon wolf hadn't been received by the queendoms in anyone's living memory, and Indigo had to plead her case with Kalmara for hours. Kuno, whose petition to the queendoms to support the Order had met a lukewarm reception, stayed quiet. There was little he could say, he argued, that would be as convincing as the wolf's words. In the end, Indigo's father persuaded the regent, appealing to his wife's pride. She would be famous, he said, for being the leader who met with a wolf.

And not just any wolf, Indigo discovered. Only when the outsider and the regent had stepped into the specially made Peace Ring and exchanged formal names did Indigo realize the wolf was Argasar, the Blackmoon's High Alpha.

"Indigo tells me you lost your entire pack," the queen regent said. "My condolences."

"Lost is a polite term," Argasar growled. "They are worse than dead. Your princess here buried my mate, Bakha."

Guilt coursed through Indigo. She had lamed the Alpha female during the run, which had led to her being attacked by her own kind. Did Argasar know this? If so, he gave no indication.

"So it is the Urzok's Pacification?"

The wolf nodded, his tail limp and defeated. "Get north, while you still can. They eat your kind."

"So do you," Kalmara retorted.

The wolf barked a mirthless laugh. "Not like this. They breed and raise your kind in cages and then slaughter them in the thousands for skins and meat."

Indigo's insides grew cold. The thousands? That was half the queendom.

"Those are rumors only," her aunt said, but she sounded unsure.

"I've seen it," the wolf snapped. "How do you think my pack was Pacified? One of ours thought it would be an easy meal, to steal into these breeding farms and make away with a rabbit. I was against it. I didn't care that it was winter, that the herds had been steadily disappearing. We wouldn't touch Urzok territory. But my son persuaded the pack to join him, and my mate couldn't bear to lose him. So they went without my knowledge or blessing." The wolf's voice held not only anger and regret but, most of all, sorrow. "I followed. But was too late. They're not the same."

Indigo never thought she'd feel such pity for a wolf. Cold loneliness radiated from him like winter sunlight off snow. A wolf without a pack was simply a wild dog. No clan, no kin, no purpose. There was no cure for Pacification. It was what everyone feared most about the Urzoks and their expanding empire: their ability to rob other beings of speech, of identity. Indigo still couldn't believe that the wolves of Blackmoon were no more. She suddenly realized the significance of there being no more Runs, no more initiates. It was as though a part of Alvareth culture and identity had died with the Blackmoons.

"...to do what you suggest," Kalmara was saying. "These are our lands, we should just abandon them?"

"This is my land, too," Argasar growled. "And I led the entire Blackmoon packs. Our families have hunted here for generations. But if I could make those decisions again, I would head north and save my kind. Save my mate, my sons." He turned to leave. "You have that chance—do not waste it."

"Where will you go?" Indigo asked.

His answer sent her heart pounding. "I will pray to Aktu, then head for Mount Mahkah to join the Order." A hard, angry look settled on his features. "Unlike you, I have nothing left to lose."

* * *

Feeling upset always led her to the same place.

Indigo entered the training yard, a patch of flattened grass northwest of the main warrens where the royals honed their fighting skills. Whenever her mind felt scattered, she could always rely on sword movements to calm and center her. Strange, she thought now, that it had been Kalmara who had first shown her how sword play could soothe as well as stimulate the mind. Was there a distinct moment where their relationship had started to sour? Or had it been a gradual erosion, their opposing natures grating more and more with the years? Everything had changed once her mother and Azel died.

She chose a practice blade from the wooden rack, its face scarred from numerous sessions, and began thrusting and hacking at one of the straw targets propped in a corner. It felt good to focus her anger, to have an enemy to shred. Soon she was sweating in the afternoon warmth, her arm burning from the exertion.

She didn't know what her aunt would decide, but surely the queendoms couldn't stay, not with Argasar's story of what had happened to the Blackmoons. Indigo thrust with even greater frustration at the thought that her aunt had, as always, disregarded her opinion. Kalmara would never fight. The most she

would do would be to flee north, possibly invade other territories rather than defend her own. Indigo felt a rush of bitterness. It wasn't even Kalmara's decision to make, as she should rightfully be queen.

"I guess there's some truth to the rumors. You can hold a sword."

She didn't bother to glance back. Kuno's considerable frame cast most of the training yard in shadow.

"Did you mean it? About my being chosen to join the Order?"

The bear moved to a cistern of water in one corner and buried his muzzle for a deep drink. He raised his dribbling face and wiped it dry with one furry arm. "What do you think?"

"I wonder whether the Order only wanted me for my queendom."

Kuno began examining the practice blades, testing some of them with one paw. "It's a pity if we can't have Alvareth behind the Order. But no, the main reason I came was for you, Princess. The head of the Order named you."

Indigo stopped in mid stab. She had heard much of the Order's controversial leader, as many had. "Is it true he's a—"

Kuno nodded. "Yes. It's true. But even so, I'd trust him with my life. You can, too." He caught her looking at the scars that marked his body: some minor, others evidence of having grazed death. "Mankahar is in the midst of dark times."

"So is Alvareth." Indigo shook her head. "Would you ever believe we were once a queendom of fierce warriors?"

"Borla told me the law," the bear said, stepping closer. "There's no rule to say how long a regent can deny you the throne."

"What are you saying?"

"That unless you have the support of the whole of Alvareth, Kalmara may never make you queen."

"My father wouldn't allow that," Indigo argued. "Besides, Alvareth would support me."

The bear shook his head. "Maybe in spirit. But her hold on those with power is strong as gout on old bones. You'd be hard pressed to contest her now."

Indigo knew he was right. All these years she'd spent training at the sword, hoping the Order would accept her, while her aunt had been tightening her grip on Alvareth. She had been strengthening her own meager fighting arm while Kalmara had been strengthening her entire political base. She berated herself for being so blind.

"Perhaps I am not suited to be queen," she said bitterly.

The bear shook his head. "You're suited. But you may have to prove it to Alvareth."

Just then Borla hurried over, tense. “The queendoms have decided on your initiation.”

Indigo refused to be rushed, gathering her thoughts as she carefully wiped down and replaced her blade. She then followed Borla through the maze of residential warrens to the sacred smoke house of the Holy One.

Every queendom had a sacred warren where important matters were weighed, chewed over, and decided. Alvareth’s was the largest of all the queendoms, and its priest was one of the most respected.

Indigo turned to Kuno. “I’m sorry, but—”

“I know. Outsiders can’t enter,” the bear said. “I will wait for news here.”

Indigo drew a deep breath and nodded to Borla, who opened the warren flap and followed her in.

The heady, musty tang of jairun weed greeted her, seeping into her fur. Only the most momentous decisions required the use of jairun, a rare plant from the south capable of generating powerful dreams. Judging from the haze, Indigo guessed the pipe had been passed around at least twice. Her head reeled even without having partaken.

The seven queens were ranged around the central hearth where stones to heat the jairun sat atop smoldering embers. Indigo could make out her aunt at the northern end, with three queens on either side. The Holy One, a blade-thin wisp of a rabbit whose tattoos had faded over the years, sat near the hearth, pinching pieces of jairun into a pot nestled in the stones.

“Be seated,” Kalmara said once Indigo had clapped her paws in greeting towards each of the queens. She obeyed, though cautiously, trying to keep her head from reeling.

“The other queens and I have spoken and agree that the Spring Runs are to be suspended for the time being. We have therefore devised a new initiation rite for those who ran this year.”

Indigo tried to keep her face impassive. *Here it comes.*

“Those who ran shall be tested by Uldana, our royal sword instructor. She will have say over who displays skill enough to be initiated.”

Indigo held her breath, confused. That was it? Uldana was a respected sword swinger, and had taught all the royals, but to simply have to display skill—it was almost too easy.

“If I pass I shall then come of age and inherit the queendom?” Indigo asked.

The queens looked at each other. Horjanna, a dark jet rabbit whose ears and paws were riddled with white, answered. “A crown princess’s initiation should be special, and not like the others.”

Indigo’s jaw tightened. This was not Alvareth custom, but something her

aunt had probably persuaded the queens to support. “No disrespect, but is it not traditional for crown princesses to be tested in the same way as everyone else? To show we do not put ourselves above others?”

“But a crown princess *is* above others,” Kalmara said. “This is a chance to show you’re not like everyone else, but unique. Powerful. A true warrior queen.” Indigo sensed the hint of mockery. “You have been training hard at the sword. Some even say you are the best. Therefore, to earn your initiate’s tattoos you must win against Alvareth’s top sword wielder.”

Indigo flushed as if slapped.

Borla stiffened. “You would fight your own niece?”

“I would fight those who may not place Alvareth’s interests above their own,” the regent replied, cool. She turned back to Indigo. “As Queen Regent I am formally challenging your right to the Alvareth throne, to be determined by sword combat.”

Indigo tried not to suffocate on the jairun smoke, now pressing in on her like a shroud. Her world was making no sense. She felt as if invisible shackles had clamped onto her, and she didn’t know how to escape. She didn’t even know how to answer.

“I’m doing what’s best for Alvareth,” Kalmara continued. “You’ve been chosen by the Order, which is a great honor. But someone must look after the queendom while you are gone.”

“My becoming queen and my joining the Order do not affect one another!” It took all of Indigo’s self-control to keep her voice even.

“It does if you intend to take Alvareth to war,” Horjanna said.

And suddenly it all fell into place, as if a blindfold had been ripped from Indigo’s eyes.

Kalmara had preyed on the other queens’ fear of war, painting her niece as the hot-blooded, inexperienced princess who would embroil them all in the Order’s battle against the Urzoks. Better to send her off to the Order and let Kalmara remain in power. Borla—wise, politically astute Borla—would have seen this coming. But not Indigo. Never before had she so envied her sister’s ability to untangle Alvareth’s political web, which to her remained so opaque. She remembered her outburst when Kuno had first arrived, saying he would have her allegiance once she was queen. What a fool, to have shown her intent too publicly, too early!

“Since Kuno wishes to leave as soon as possible,” Kalmara said, “I think it best to have the test tomorrow. Unless you object.”

Tomorrow. That gave her little chance to prepare. Yet asking for more time would, Indigo knew, be an admission of weakness.

“And if I lose?” Indigo asked. The words stuck in her throat, but she had to find out how far the other queens had turned against her. Kalmara cast a glance at Horjanna.

The old queen’s gaze was gentle, but unapologetic. “Then we will support Kalmara as Alvareth’s permanent queen, to rule until the end of her natural life.”

Chapter 6

“Indigo! Wait!”

She didn’t slow. Her feet moved of their own accord, fueled by fury and blistered pride. By the time her sisters and Kuno caught up with her, she had managed to wrestle her features into a stoic mask worthy of royalty. But none of them were fooled.

“You’re right to be angry,” the bear said. “But sulking won’t win the queendom.”

“Defeat Kalmara? Who has ever defeated the Bird? She means to keep the throne and humiliate me as well.”

“She does have the other queens on her side. They are frightened of going to war,” Borla explained.

Indigo made a face. “And to think, we’ve always been some of the fiercest warriors on the steppes.”

“Alvareth has changed much in the years I’ve been gone,” Kuno said. “I’d never have thought the queendoms would resist a just cause.”

“You’re forgetting your one advantage,” Borla cut in. “If you do best Kalmara, you’ll win the respect of all the queendoms in one stroke. You’ll be untouchable. She’s counting on you to fail, which is why she insisted she be named permanent queen if you lose. You have to fight, Indigo. And you have to win. An uninitiated rabbit cannot take the throne.”

Indigo shook her head. “It’s impossible. How can I defeat my own aunt?”
The one who taught me the sword in the first place?

Dorju tapped Indigo’s arm, and made a sign with her paw.

Unused to politics as she was, Indigo knew Dorju had a point: there was one rabbit who might possibly help her.

* * *

She found him in the groom house.

More of a steam pit, the grooming warren was an earthen dugout covered by a thatched roof with a small hole in the center. Beneath the hole was a hearth filled with stones baked in fires until they shone white-hot, searing the very air around them. Herbal oils were poured on these stones until the occupants’ pores practically oozed with scent, and grooming apparatus hung in orderly rows upon

the walls: brushes, clips, combs, nail picks, and files.

Indigo strode in, welcoming the blast of humid air that wrapped around her. It was tangible, like wrestling an enemy. There were gasps and shocked exclamations as naked bucks scurried to find their clothes. Separate grooming hours for males and females were strictly enforced, but Indigo was too upset to care.

“Father, I need to speak with you,” Indigo called out, recognizing Lukkas’s broad frame on the far side of the hearth. He had always been handsome, and her mother had joked that the only reason she could have snared such a husband was due to her throne.

She sensed rather than saw her father’s frown of surprised disapproval. “This is a male space, Indigo.”

She strode up and sat next to him, trying to ignore the discomfort of the heat and oil in her fur.

“You’re the only one she’ll listen to, Father. You have to change her mind.”

Her father regarded her for a moment before turning to the others in the bathhouse. “Forgive my daughter’s lack of manners. Please, everyone, if you could give us our privacy....”

The bucks obediently began to gather their things and slip out. She recognized some of her mother’s cousins, a few of her father’s nephews. One of the last ones to leave was a particularly handsome buck, Nodin: the sword smith’s son and a distant relative of Kalmara’s by marriage. Indigo had caught him staring at her on more than one occasion, which had always secretly pleased her. His fur was slick from the humidity, and he was the only one who didn’t bother to cover himself. She blushed and looked away, glad when the door flap shut behind him.

Her father’s ears twitched. “You can have him if you want. Your aunt would approve of your first being one of her favored clans.”

“I didn’t come to talk of that.” She blinked condensed steam from her eyes, irritated that he would mention matchmaking at such a time.

He sighed. “There isn’t anything I can do, Indigo. You made your opinion clear: as queen you would lead us to war. No one wants war.”

“Alvareth queens were once legendary at war,” she argued. “Doesn’t that count for something?”

“That was generations ago. Since the Great Defeat the rabbits of the steppes only want peace. The Urzoks are too strong. We were nearly wiped out the last time we clashed. Or don’t you take your history lessons anymore since you thought you would become queen?”

Indigo bristled. She had skipped a few of the more boring lessons, but only to

practice the sword. "That's not the point, Father. The point is that she doesn't have the right to do this."

Lukkas tipped an earthen jar of water over the hearth stones, the resulting hiss like a reproach. "That's where you're wrong, daughter. The regent's first duty is to Alvareth. You may be of age, but are you truly ready to lead the queendom?"

"It doesn't matter if I'm ready. I'm of age! Or I will be once—"

Her father's whiskers stood on end in a familiar expression of disapproval. "It doesn't matter if you're ready? What would your mother say to that?"

At this Indigo fell silent.

"You're so eager to go to war that you haven't thought what's best for Alvareth," Lukkas continued, more gently. "Or what the other queendoms want."

"This isn't about what they want, it's what Kalmara wants!"

Her father shook his head. "It wasn't your aunt's idea."

The realization sank into her like cold, and something inside her wilted. "You suggested it."

"I did. And the other queens made no secret that they'd support the challenge." He let the silence stretch between them for a moment. "Alvareth isn't a lone wolf. It doesn't do what it wants without considering the other queendoms. Have you even bothered to ask yourself: who will watch over Alvareth if its ruler is away?" He searched her eyes, then shook his head. "You have much to learn before you make a queen as wise as Kalmara."

"And how am I supposed to learn to be a queen if Kalmara never allows me into the clan meetings? She ignores all my suggestions." The sting of her father's betrayal still burned hot in her chest.

"Perhaps," her father said, "joining the Order will teach you what you cannot learn here. It pains me to see you leave, but isn't it what you've always wanted?" He tossed another jar of water on the stones and let a curtain of steam rise between them.

They sat in silence for a while, the tension mingling with the heat.

"I had a dream last night." Lukkas didn't look at her. "Your mother came to me and said you would find the omatje on your travels. That you'd restore our family's honor."

Indigo glanced at him. She had never told him of her own recurring dream. Could her mother really have spoken to both of them?

"You blame Kalmara for what happened to your mother. But she did what she thought right." Her father stood, blinking sweat from his eyes. "If you want to be queen, you must learn to do the same. Join the Order, avenge your mother and sister. Then you will be fit to lead Alvareth. I cannot persuade Kalmara to

overturn what has already been decided.”

“She is the best sword slinger in the seven queendoms. How will I possibly defeat her?” Indigo protested.

Her father paused at the grooming-house flap, his paw on the heavy weave. “Perhaps you are not meant to, daughter.”

Chapter 7

The next day Indigo rose with the sun, knowing sleep was impossible. A strengthening wind had already scraped the sky to a clean, hardened blue. The prairie grass bent and danced, making newly hatched insects cling like dewdrops to the blades.

Today she would face Kalmara. Kalmara, her aunt, the one who had taught her the sword as soon as she could walk. She had spent a fitful night trying to think of some strategy that might work against the Bird, but couldn't come up with a solid plan. She also couldn't shut out her father's words, the painful knowledge that he doubted her ability to rule.

As she watched the grounds being cleared and swept for her initiation, she suddenly realized Kuno had joined her, a chunk of half-eaten barley bread in one paw.

They stood in silence for a moment, each knowing the other's worries without saying a word. The years suddenly melted away, and Indigo realized with a shock that she felt more comfortable with Kuno than she had with anyone since Azel.

None of this would be happening if Azel hadn't died. Indigo was fourth in line, never meant to be crown princess, much less queen. But she knew now she wanted the queendom, wanted to live up to those legendary warrior queens as much as she wanted to sink her blade into that muskrat. But could her father be right? Was she not deserving of the throne? What if only the Order could make her a hardened fighter, a warrior with enough skill to not only hunt down an omatje but also earn the throne?

She spotted Kalmara, Lukkas, and her sisters readying themselves at the far end of the grounds, where royalty traditionally sat. The other queens were there as well, eager to watch this internal quarrel within Alvareth's royal house. She made her slow way over to pay the obligatory respects.

When she clapped her paws to Kalmara, the queen regent smiled at her, but her eyes were sharp, as if searching for signs that her niece might back out.

"This day is as hard for you as for me, Indigo. I hope you know this isn't personal."

Indigo swiveled her ears. "It's for the good of Alvareth. I know." The words tasted bitter.

"I told your father you'd understand," Kalmara smiled. "Now I'm sure you

have as much to prepare as I do.” And with that dismissal she turned and strode away to greet the other queens.

The crowd of onlookers had thickened, pressing in on the sides and jostling for a view. The cleared area had been cordoned off with cloth markers, which cracked and popped in the stiffening wind. Indigo spied Uldana, the sword tutor who would act as judge, triple checking the wooden swords to be used during the fight. Her apprentice followed at her heels, taking commands and bobbing his head at her instructions.

Kuno picked his way through the crowd, ignoring curious stares and half-audible whispers. He joined the royals in their allocated spot and gave a nod of encouragement to Indigo.

Indigo turned back to the present task. She wondered, for just a moment, whether things would have been better if Kuno hadn’t shown up, hadn’t saved them from the Pacified wolves. Perhaps she could have fought them off, and Kalmara wouldn’t have this excuse to keep the throne from her. But there was no use in focusing on such things. Burnt grass couldn’t be made sweet again. She picked up her wooden blade, tested her arm guards, and went through the motions of checking everything for tears or fractures, though she had already checked them multiple times that morning.

Kalmara entered the ring, her royal robes gone. In their place was casual fighting garb, tucked tight into supple boots. She motioned to a servant, who hastened to raise a horn to his lips. The three blasts drew a silence over the crowd, and for a moment only the snarling of the wind could be heard.

The queen regent held up her sword. “Welcome. I call upon the six queens of the steppe lands to witness today’s fight and the pact I have with Crown Princess Indigo. Alvareth’s future shall be determined by today’s combat. If Indigo should win this fight against me, she shall be entitled to the Alvareth throne, and no one here shall stand in her way.” The queen regent paused, making sure she had everyone’s attention. “If, however, I win, Princess Indigo will forever forsake the Alvareth throne, and I shall be sworn as queen until my death.”

A murmur rippled through the gathered spectators.

Kalmara turned to Indigo. “Do you, Crown Princess, accept these terms?”

Indigo drew a deep breath, knowing that giving in to her resentment would only affect the fight. “I do.”

Kalmara smiled. “Then let us begin.”

A gong sounded. Shouts and eager speculation rose around them, the placing of bets and the cries of encouragement growing steadily louder. Indigo walked out to the center of the grounds and watched Kalmara take her place.

They had sparred countless times. But this, both knew, would be different.

This would shatter what tenuous familial affection remained between them. They regarded each other, the wind tugging and clawing at their fur, their garments.

“The Bird shall not grant mercy, Princess. Royal blood or no,” Kalmara said, her voice soft so only Indigo could hear.

Indigo gripped her sword hard. “I shall not ask for it.”

Kalmara gave the hint of a smile. “I wouldn’t expect you to, niece.” She signaled to the gong striker, and the instrument boomed once more.

The two combatants circled each other. Though Indigo knew her aunt’s sword play better than almost anyone, she had never truly fought her. She knew the regent meant what she said: she would give no leeway.

Like a hawk, Kalmara struck, sword raised.

The first thunderclap of wood on wood reverberated up Indigo’s arm and into the base of her skull.

She forced herself to block out the shouts and taunts that assailed her from the sidelines. Her aunt lunged, and Indigo’s distraction meant she missed the telltale shift in Kalmara’s body signaling a feint. She dodged the practice blade’s sharp end but couldn’t escape her aunt’s free paw ploughing into her shoulder. A collective roar went up from the audience, though Indigo couldn’t make out the supporters from the doubters.

The Bird was enjoying this, Indigo realized. As Borla had always said, Kalmara only chose fights that she was certain to win. And public wins were particularly sweet, especially when so much was at stake.

Kalmara shifted the blade in her paw and swooped. Indigo took it as a good sign that the Bird was constantly bringing the fight to her rather than waiting for Indigo to tire herself. She parried, trying to see the plan behind her aunt’s movements—a *good fighter must always have a plan. The best ones plan at least five moves in advance.*

Indigo kept her sword close to her body, knowing the Bird’s specialty was to find openings when least anticipated. One mistimed attack, and Kalmara would have her blade tickling Indigo’s ribcage.

She parried several thrusts before realizing her aunt was trying to tire her out on her weaker side—her left. And it was working. Even though the Bird danced and flitted constantly, while Indigo tried to stay more grounded, her arms were growing sore, her back burned, and her legs were threatening cramps. The wind wasn’t helping either—it battered her in the face, stung her eyes. She couldn’t help thinking of everything she would be losing: the throne, her mother’s legacy, her identity, her home. She needed to get the regent off her own weak side, and soon. But how?

The wind shifted, chasing a mass of clouds across the sun. Shadows fled and

shrank as objects and faces became whitewashed for the few breaths the sun broke through.

The Wind.

The Wind had won his bride by covering the sun.

Good or bad, it was a plan. Indigo made a deliberately clumsy swing, careful not to leave herself undefended. Kalmara easily blocked her with the sword's forte, before lunging in for several blindingly fast cuts. Indigo retreated, making a show of breathing heavily and giving all indications of buying time. Which was true, up to a point.

With a look that was almost disappointment at impending victory, Kalmara advanced. Indigo kept retreating, giving weaker resistance as she moved in a semicircle. A few jeers reached her.

"Give up already!"

"Take her down, Bird!"

"She's running away! That's cheating!"

She steeled herself, forcing the voices out of her ears and head. She needed to stay focused if this was going to work. She needed to convince her aunt to take the bait.

She chose her spot, trying to keep an eye on the sun and her ears tuned to the wind. Timing would be everything. If Indigo misjudged any one of three things, Kalmara would walk away the uncontested queen. How long had it been since the sun disappeared? How much cloud cover had blown in? The Bird was closing in, convinced now that her niece had exhausted herself and was only delaying the kill.

Indigo made her move. She stumbled to a point where she judged the sun to be directly behind her. She didn't have to wait long. Kalmara attacked, ready to end the match and Indigo's hopes for the throne. She knew her aunt would use one of her favorite end moves: either an easy thrust on the outside to disable Indigo on her weak arm, or a reverse stab to the chest. She just needed a little help....

There!

A dagger of light shot out from behind a cloud. The warmth grazed Indigo's head and plunged directly into Kalmara's eyes.

Indigo moved like a greased ferret. The Bird didn't have a weak side, but having committed to her lunge she couldn't change course. The blinding sun blotted out her target for just an instant, but it was all Indigo needed. She sidestepped and then grabbed her aunt's outstretched sword arm at the wrist. A quick wrench and a well-placed kick to the back paw, and she had Kalmara off balance. By the time the regent could react and try to twist away, Indigo already

had her wooden sword tip at Kalmara's side, angled into her abdomen.

Indigo panted, truly spent. Her aunt looked up at her, first with shock and then angry disbelief. The gathered crowds were similarly stunned, until Indigo noticed a faint drumming that built and grew until it was a roar.

Thousands of rabbits' feet were drumming applause for a contest the likes of which they'd never see again.

The princess turned towards the royal seats. The other six queens had obviously not expected this outcome, and their expressions showed grudging admiration. Next to her, Kalmara was outwardly calm, but a telltale flush of rage was spreading at the base of her aunt's ears. Uldana the judge entered the ring. The drumming subsided.

"Well fought," Uldana declared, clearly impressed at this upset. "Do you, Kalmara, freely admit and attest that Indigo, Crown Princess, did best you fairly and without any cheating?"

Indigo saw her aunt hesitate, her mind clearly trying to comprehend defeat. A heavy silence descended, all ears trained on the queen regent.

Kalmara slowly raised a paw in the symbol of surrender. "Let it be known that the Bird is defeated."

The crowd erupted into further stamping of feet until Uldana waved them back into silence. "I declare the Crown Princess the victor, and Indigo, daughter of Delamar, shall be sworn Queen of Alvareth."

The world tilted and thunder filled Indigo's ears. Alvareth's cheers seemed to shake the very ground.

The gong sounded, clear and decisive, before its last tones were swallowed by the roar of the onlookers. Indigo looked for her sisters and found them sitting next to a grinning Kuno, their faces bright with pride and relief. She saw her father's face, a smile masking his concern.

"You're a fool if you think you can be queen from afar," Kalmara said. "You lack political sense."

"I don't plan to rule from afar," Indigo sheathed her sword. "And fortunately, I know someone with great political sense."

Kalmara looked confused, suspicion rising under her calm demeanor.

Indigo turned to where the other queens sat with her sisters and Kuno, raising her voice to be heard over the crowd. "The Order has named me, and I shall go. Therefore my first act as queen is to appoint a regent to rule Alvareth in my absence." An expectant silence fell over the grounds. She looked at Lukkas. "Alvareth needs a strong paw at the moment. One stronger and wiser than mine."

Her father sat up, expectant.

“And despite appearances, this rabbit has two of the strongest paws I know.” She let her gaze slide over to her sisters. “I hereby appoint Borla Regent of Alvareth until I return.”

Kalmara’s face twisted as if tasting something rancid. Borla blinked, stunned, while Dorju and Kuno grinned approval. Her father simply stared, and for a moment Indigo felt a twinge of sadness—he relished his title as royal husband. She had, in one stroke, robbed him of his status.

Horjanna stood, looking at the other queens for approval before speaking. “The Seven Queendoms have heard your decree, Queen Indigo. We shall recognize Borla as Regent of Alvareth while you are at the Order.”

And when I return, I shall make a worthy queen. You will see.

Chapter 8

The next day passed in a flurry of preparation.

There were provisions to be packed, weapons to be selected and, most important, oaths of allegiance to be gained from the other queens. Indigo and Borla visited each in turn. They drank cups of spiced rue to seal Indigo's position as Alvareth's one true queen, and her sister as regent.

When she was sure all was in order, Indigo went to her father's warren to say her goodbyes and found him fussing about his arm bands for the night's feast celebrating Borla's regency. She watched him as he snapped at the servants, trying to get the height just right. There was a hint of vanity, of vulnerability at his lost status, that she hadn't seen before.

The shock of it swept over her and she wondered how she could have been so blind: her father loved Kalmara, and loved her a great deal. She should have been glad, for was it not good for a husband to love his wife? But somehow she felt it was a betrayal of her mother, a betrayal of Azel. *How long had he loved her?* She chased the thought away.

"You're as handsome as you ever were. And you'll always be Queen Father, remember."

Lukkas grunted, still smarting from recent events, but she knew she had pleased him. "You've learned flattery. There's more white than tan on my chest now." He looked at her for a moment. "I'm sure you'll learn much more while you're with the Order."

"That is my plan."

He smiled. "What you did took humility. I am proud of you, daughter."

"Borla is your daughter too. Protect her from Kalmara while I'm gone."

"Everything will be fine," he said. "Kalmara is not the enemy you imagine. Promise me you'll return?"

"I promise."

He touched his nose to hers. "Now go. The ink master won't wait forever, even for a queen."

Halfway across the quadrangle, Indigo was so absorbed mulling over her father's words about returning that she didn't even notice her sisters until they were nearly upon her.

Borla shook her head in admiration. "They're already composing ballads about Alvareth's new warrior queen."

“I’m not ruling yet.”

Her sister smiled. “Kalmara won’t dare try anything now you’ve publicly beaten her. You have too many admirers.” Her expression turned serious. “But you must come back. I don’t want to be Regent for longer than I have to.”

Indigo looked at her in surprise. Borla shrugged. “I’ve never wanted the throne, Bobo. Fact is, I was relieved when Kalmara named you Crown Princess. A queen has too many enemies.”

Indigo looked to Dorju, who nodded and made a flurry of signs with her paws: *it’s true. I felt the same.*

Borla hugged Indigo tight. “May Aktu guide you well. Come home as soon as you can, little sister.”

And having said goodbye, Indigo knew there was only one other rabbit she had to see.

* * *

The ink master dribbled water on the lumpy mass of charcoal, smoothing it out with his sacred stone. Indigo’s heart thudded, and her long ears burned as if they already felt the needle.

“Your Highness need not fear.” The master smiled, revealing more gum than teeth. His paws were so stained from years of patterning the ears of fresh initiates that they shone black instead of blue. No two patterns were ever the same, even though he had marked dozens of initiates like Indigo every spring. Here, in his sacred tent that smelled of ash, sweat, and smoke, rabbits entered as initiates and left as adults.

“I am not afraid,” Indigo replied. She realized it was true.

The old master nodded, pausing in his ink grinding to hold out a paw.

Indigo gave him the pouch she had brought. The elder rabbit opened it and held up a sliver of bone, its polished length winking in the fire’s light. All initiates used a bone from an ancestor or deceased relative. This sliver had been made from her mother’s thighbone. Indigo hoped the superstition was true: that you absorbed the spirit and power of the one whose bone created your patterns. She felt a sharp ache for her mother and sister, who both should have been here for her patterning. But burnt grass couldn’t be made sweet again.

“She would be proud, your mother.” The ink master tested the bone’s sharpness. Satisfied, he rested it against the ink pot and turned back to Indigo.

She will be prouder once I find the one who wronged her and Azel. And when I return for the throne.

“Drink, and let me see what truth lies within you,” he said, ladling a serving

of warmed rue tea into a cup. He motioned towards a jar of honey, but she demurred, as was customary. To sweeten the rue was an admission of weakness, a reluctance to shoulder the bitterness and responsibilities of adulthood.

She drank the rue in one swallow. The liquid burned its caustic way down to her belly and lapped there. The scents of ash, ink, and oils pressed in on her, and the heat from the fire made her ears flush, as if the blood there were already eager to break through her skin.

The ink master leaned forward. He pulled the bottom lids of her eyes down, testing the rue's work. He smiled, satisfied, and began grinding the ink again, eyes closed.

"What do you see?" Indigo asked, unable to contain herself. *Will I avenge my mother and sister? Will I return from the Order alive?*

"I see a journey," he said softly. "A journey to the ends of Mankahar."

Indigo's blood raced through her.

"Will I find the one I seek?" She had waited half her lifetime to ask this question. This was the one time in a rabbit's life when they could consult the ink master and touch their future.

"That depends on who you seek."

"The one who killed my mother and sister," she replied.

He bent his head, concentrating. A few breaths later he straightened, eyes wide. He recoiled and shut his eyes, but not before she saw the fear in them.

"Tell me."

"It's unclear..."

"Master of the ink, tell me." No one commanded the ink master, but she was the queen. She had defeated the Bird.

"I see an *omatje*," he said, as if the words were being forced from him. "One with immense power."

Excitement laced with fear swelled in her. "Yes. A muskrat." She swallowed. "Do I kill him?"

The ink master shook his grizzled head. "I cannot see if he is a muskrat. But you will not kill him."

Her heart dropped. "Then he shall kill me."

Again, the ink master shook his head. "I see you fighting to save this *omatje*."

Save an omatje? A creature hated by all? "Why would I do that?"

"Out of love."

She froze. Had the ink master finally lost himself to old age? "That's not possible."

He busied himself with the inks. "Perhaps I am wrong."

“Have you been wrong before?”

He dipped the needle in ink and paused. “No.”

She bit her tongue, knowing she had already asked too much, shown irreverence blatant even for a queen. He had to be wrong. She, of all creatures, love and defend an omatje? She thanked Aktu this would never reach beyond the warren walls, for the ink master’s predictions were always for the initiate’s ears only.

She watched the elder rabbit’s lips moving and then felt the cool pressure of his gnarled paw on her left ear. He flattened the surface, holding it steady. The first bite of bone through flesh drew sharp pain, but also a fulfillment, tangible and real like the warmth of the rue. Indigo the Princess was now Indigo the warrior queen. And she didn’t care what he predicted. She would find and kill the omatje.

She headed straight for her own warren almost before her ink was dry. She had waited so long to gain her tattoos and become an adult, yet they hadn’t magically granted her the answers she’d expected.

She gathered the items she’d prepared: a traveling cloak, her sword, a plain satchel devoid of royal emblems or decoration. Next she hurriedly disrobed from her lavish clothes, donning the sturdiest pants and shirt she had. She then slid her feet into boots, and in grabbing her satchel saw her mother’s royal crimson mantle folded neatly in a basket by her bed. She smoothed a paw over it, her heart lurching again at what she was leaving behind. She could take nothing of her sister’s or mother’s with her, she knew. And by turning her back on the mantle, she felt as if she were turning her back on her own queendom, her own duties, everything her mother or Azel would have expected of her. She forced these thoughts from her mind and mouthed a silent prayer to Aktu before slipping out.

Kuno was waiting for her, his black fur dusted silver under the moon’s touch. He huffed in greeting when she emerged from the high grasses. The new moon was setting, a curve of light in an otherwise starless pre-dawn heaven. The winds brushed through the grass around her like the sighs of passing dreams.

“Congratulations on your patterning, Your Highness,” he said.

“I’m still not used to the title.” She remembered Borla’s words, that a queen had too many enemies. “Maybe it’s best if as few as possible know I’m queen.”

The bear nodded, thoughtful. “Well, I hope the ink master gave you the answers you seek—Princess.” At her silence he added, “Sometimes vengeance takes up so much space, it leaves no room for clear answers.”

He turned and began loping towards the southeast. Indigo glanced towards Alvareth, seeing the merry lights of celebration that lit her home like a beacon of

farewell.

She would be back, she promised herself. Never mind the ink master's prediction, she would return with the omatje's head, be a warrior queen of legend, and lead Alvareth to reclaim their southern lands.

In the distance a Pacified wolf howled. Indigo thought of Argasar and wondered where he was now, whether he had left to find purpose in the Order. With each step she took, she was leaving behind all that was safe and known. But every step also brought her closer to the omatje.

And so she would walk on, into the unknown. Into the brutal lands controlled by those called Man.

Afterword

Thanks for reading! All authors appreciate reviews to not only help spread the word about their books, but to improve their writing.

To leave a review for *The Queen and the Dagger* on Amazon, simply click [here](#). You can also follow Indigo on her journey in *Theo and the Forbidden Language*.

Please feel free to visit my [author's page](#) or [Facebook page](#) to find out about the next installment of the series and upcoming books.

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About the Author

Melanie Ansley was born in Windsor, Ontario, then bundled off to China at the age of five. Her fascination with mythical talking animals started in Shanghai, where she'd buy Chinese comics like *Journey to the West*. In the 1980s she spent most of her lunch breaks in her Hong Kong primary school's library, where she developed an insatiable appetite for fantasy and historical fiction. She now splits her time between Beijing and Los Angeles, and has written several produced screenplays.

Also by Melanie Ansley

Theo and the Forbidden Language