

# CHAPTER ONE



Halfway through his twenty-fifth year and to his acute relief, Prince Kadou became an uncle.

Despite Kadou spending the entirety of his sister's pregnancy in terror and worry, the whole affair ended up being quite as routine as such things can be but for the fact that the niece in question pushed him one joyous rung further down the line of succession. The night of his sister's labors, he prayed fervently in the temple for hours until, at last, the good news arrived with the sudden crack of fireworks above, the shower of colored splendor—and Kadou felt like he could breathe easy for the first time in months. Years, maybe. It was the lamp of the lighthouse above him after a long, stormy night at sea.

Of course, peace and relief are luxuries that not even princes can easily afford for more than a moment or two; Princess Eyne's birth was followed by days of celebration—for the court, for the people of the capital and the rest of the kingdom, for the hundreds of kahyalar who served throughout the palace and the government with loyalty and devotion. With his sister, the sultan, indisposed (and gleefully taking advantage of her own opportunity for some peace), the duties of representing House Mahisti to the populace naturally fell to Kadou, as did a greater-than-usual proportion of the daily concerns of the realm—a very alarming break-in at the Shipbuilder's Guild on the night of the birth itself; a wealthy merchant from Oissos caught committing one of the most blasphemous crimes an Araṣti prince could conceive of several days later; several perplexing tantrums thrown by Siranos, the body-father of the new princess (which Kadou's already shaky nerves

found as upsetting and alarming on a personal level as the former two catastrophes were on a larger scale) . . . All these added up to a solid whirlwind week during which Kadou barely had time to breathe, let alone hold his new niece for more than a minute or two the morning after she was born.

But waters rising to the peak of a hectic king-tide meant only that they would inevitably fall back to a time of dull lax-tides, and it seemed Her Majesty decidedly agreed with this system, and moreover felt that it was up to her to hurry things along.

“You look thin,” she’d told Kadou not two days before, in a very bossy, big-sister sort of voice. They’d heard of a satyota from Inacha visiting the city—a truthwitch, as they were called in the slangy street dialect of Arasük—and had hired him to question the Oissic merchant, Azuta Melachrinos tou Thorikou, about where, precisely, she had received the *huge* amount of counterfeits she’d used to attempt to pay a gambling debt. It hadn’t gone well. Azuta was too clever to answer a question straight when she could reply with a rhetorical question or a half-truth instead. But when Azuta had been dragged back to her cell, Zeliha and Kadou had had a brief moment alone, free of the need to playact formality. “You look like a wrung-out dishcloth. Are you eating? Are you sleeping?”

He hadn’t been, particularly, on either count. He’d been too worried about the progress that wasn’t being made on the investigation at the Shipbuilder’s Guild, about Siranos arrogantly inserting himself into conversations he didn’t belong in and passionately declaring that Azuta Melachrinos, his fellow countrywoman, deserved a fair trial and representation in court . . .

Too worried about having confided some these worries to the wrong people.

No, of course he hadn’t been sleeping, nor eating more than scratches here and there.

But before he’d been able to answer her, Zeliha had declared that it was high time they all got out of the palace for a day and thought about literally anything besides kingdom-running. A hunt, she said, would be just the thing.



It was said that in ancient times, one of Asanbughaa's sorcerers had raised the plateau where the palace now stood. It was the only way the geography made sense—the rest of the land around was mostly flat forest or open farmland, rising to gentle hills further inland, and thence to mountains deep in the backcountry to the east and north.

The inland side of the plateau had a path downward, to match the winding switchbacks of the kingsroad along the face overlooking the city. The back path was even steeper and much more carefully concealed—it was deliberately left in a state of slight neglect: bare dirt, rather than cobblestones, with trees and shrubs allowed to grow wild along its edges and turns, the better to disguise it from casual observers. It was barely wide enough for two horses to pass each other, and in some places their riders would have had to dismount to do it.

In the forest below, there was a particular clearing, the common staging area for the beginning of royal hunts. Servants had come ahead hours before—or perhaps the day before—to assemble airy, colorful tents and pavilions, floored with carpets and cushions. The grandest of these was the sultan's, of course, and Kadou was surprised to see Zeliha already waiting when he and the few other courtiers began to arrive.

She was lounging on a low couch, surrounded by ministers, with Princess Eyne cuddled in her arms. Her pavilion, heavy blue silk embroidered with silver and topped by a fountain of white feathers at its peak, cast cool, watery light over her. She looked up at the sound of hooves. "Kadou!" she called. "Little brother, do come here."

"Majesty," he replied, scrambling off his horse and bowing. "I wasn't expecting you to come."

"I arranged it, didn't I?" she replied dryly, shifting Eyne a bit so she could free a hand to wave Kadou over. "Come here, I said. The rest of you are dismissed, thank you."

"I thought you might not have recovered enough to hunt." Kadou

handed Wing's reins off to one of his kahyalar and ducked his head to clear the hanging drape of the pavilion's walls, which had been pulled back and tied off to the corner posts to let the breeze flow through. The ministers, withdrawing as ordered, bowed to him as they passed.

"Oh, I definitely haven't," she said, and gestured to a seat near her. Kadou took it. "They hauled me here in fine style in a sedan chair like I'm already a dowager. It'll be a few more weeks yet before I can bear to sit on a horse. By the way, please help yourself," she said, nodding to a tray of sliced fruits that had been laid within reach, and plucked a piece of melon for herself. "I don't recommend childbirth, Kadou," she said seriously. "You ought to endeavor to avoid it."

He rolled his eyes at her, and let her see it too, and she grinned. It was better out here, away from the palace and the court—easier to pretend they were both still children, just the prince and the crown princess, with very few concerns beyond tutors and scholars harrying them at every moment, kahyalar fluttering nervously around them while Zeliha announced some new adventure and dragged Kadou along after her.

"Truly though," she said, "I can't imagine having a baby without six kahyalar to help. And even then, they always disappear at just the wrong moment. Can you take her? My arms are about to fall off. She's deceptively heavy."

Kadou dragged his chair closer to oblige, and between the two of them, they managed to get Eyne transferred into his arms with no more than a few ominous grumbles from the child. She was, somehow, already notably bigger and plumper than she'd been the week before. Kadou had had no idea that babies grew that fast. "If you can't enjoy the hunt yourself, why drag all of us out here?"

She sighed heavily, stretching and flexing the stiffness out of her arms. "I'm sick to death of hearing about Azuta Melachrinos. I've stared at so many counterfeits that my eyes ache."

"Are they at least . . . *bad* counterfeits?" Kadou asked, without much hope.

"See for yourself." Zeliha took a pair of coins from her pocket and held them out. A gold altın. A silver yira. He freed a hand

from holding Eyne and, feeling like he might be jinxing himself, gingerly touched the altın.

The instant the metal brushed his skin, he flinched. His gift for touch-tasting—the Araştı sense for metal—was only faint, manifesting as a few wisps of sense-memory. The sensation that met his fingertips as he touched the counterfeit was a flat *clank*, a dull and hollow sound like an empty bucket dropped on flagstones. It was so *wrong* feeling and so startling that he snatched his hand away and flexed his fingers before he tried again.

In one of his two very earliest memories, he was knee-high to all the adults, clutching at the skirts of his mother's silk kaftan and burying his face in them from shyness whenever strangers looked at him—and there were so many strangers looking at him, smiling at him, bowing to him and Mama. There was a lot of activity around them, a jumble of noises and loud talking, and the air smelled sooty and dirty, and it was very warm, and Mama was talking to one of the strangers and only absently petting his hair as he pushed his face against her leg, and the kahya assigned as his nurse had disappeared somewhere, and—

Mama bent down and picked him up, settling him on her hip, and he'd put his face into her hair and neck to hide, but she'd said, "Look, sweetheart, it's your grandfather." When he'd pulled back, she'd held up a coin—perfect, round and shining as the sun, with a little picture of Grandfather on it in profile, wearing his crown. And then, "Look, watch how the nice lady makes them," and the smiling stranger sitting at the anvil in front of Mama picked up a flat, blank circle of gold with tongs from a plate near the the fire beside her, placed it between two mysterious pieces of iron on the anvil, and *banged* it with a hammer, a loud, clear chime that made him jump. She set down the hammer, took off the top part of the thing she'd hit, and—there was grandfather's picture again, as if by magic.

The stranger had plucked it out and handed it to Mama, and Mama had tucked it into his palm. It had still been a little warm from the fire, as if it had been lying in the sunshine. "Do you know how much gold is in an altın, love?" Mama had asked.

He'd replied in a little whisper so the strangers couldn't hear him, "Nine, eight, six." She had smiled as bright as new-minted coin and kissed his cheek and told him to keep his altın safe and not to put it in his mouth.

Nine eight six. Nine hundred and eighty-six parts pure gold out of every thousand, he knew now, a fineness that had been set hundreds of years before and had never once changed, not for generations, not for *dynasties*. He still had that altın somewhere, and even now, part of his signature for coin gold—proper coins, that is, genuine ones—was the clear, bell-like chime of a hammer striking a die.

The counterfeit had to be mostly gold, because the rest of the signature was mostly the same as it usually was—the smooth flow of warm, thick cream poured from a pitcher, the flash of sunshine on nearly still water. But when he plucked it off Zeliha's palm and rubbed it between his fingertips, savoring the metal as closely as he could, he felt the other differences in it. The water-sparkle tasted faintly reddish, as if it were the light of sunset, or colored by the smoke of a wildfire.

Looking at it with his eyes rather than just the senses in his fingertips, he could see that the counterfeit was extremely fine and well-made. If he had only glanced at it lying on the table, perhaps among genuine altınlar, he wouldn't have taken any notice of it.

He drew his hand back, feeling a little sick. Zeliha snorted and tucked the coins away again, murmuring, "Yeah, that's the face that all the other touch-tasters have made, too." Kadou wasn't surprised. The consistency of their coinage was the foundation their nation was built on. The Araştı mercantile empire was vast and robust enough that their currency could be used nearly anywhere around the Sea of Serpents and in many places farther beyond, because everyone, everywhere, knew that an Araştı coin was a coin you could trust. If a merchant in Imakami, Map Sut, Oissos, Aswijan, Mangar-Khagra, Kaskinen, or N'gaka was offered an altın, they would know *exactly* what its relative value was.

Their power did not come from the edge of a sword, nor from enormous tracts of conquered territory, nor from even the navy,

though Araşt had the fastest ships in the world. It came instead from the clink of coin, an open palm, a smile. Theirs was an empire built on the bedrock of reputation before all else.

“The ambassador of Oissos is behaving with no sense of decorum whatsoever,” Zeliha went on. “She keeps following me around and *declaiming* as if she’s in the middle of her Senate. I don’t know who thought a Senate was a good idea. All it seems to do is turn out a load of annoying power-hungry bureaucrats.”

Kadou snuggled Eyne a little closer, flexing his hand again to rid himself of the sense-memory of the befouled coin. “I don’t know,” he said quietly. “It must have made sense to someone, once.” It might be nicer to choose power than to be stuck with it, he sometimes thought. Being prince sometimes felt like he was seated on the back of a ferocious wild horse that could bite or trample anyone around him who didn’t have a horse of their own. He had to be careful of it and aware of it all the time, lest it yank the reins out of his hands and buck him out of a solid seat. And who was to say that he was the best rider to tame it, simply because he had been born to it?

But then, Zeliha was right too—the Oissic Senate did seem to draw the power-hungry.

“Anyway,” she said. “It’s a nice day, and investigating Azuta Melachrinos won’t go any faster whether I’m there to hover over it or not. I needed a break and some fresh air and entertainment, and there’s really nothing more entertaining than watching a bunch of fussy people traipse around on their ponies and try to kill things without getting their hands or their hems dirty.” She picked over the tray of fruit without looking at him. “And I missed you,” she added. “You usually call me *Majesty* these days, and it makes me feel far away from you.” She shrugged, looked away.

“I miss you too,” he said softly. He bit his lip and occupied himself with fussing over the wrinkles and folds of Eyne’s swaddling cloths. She stared up at him solemnly as he did it—her eyes were huge and already quite a deep grey, promising to darken to the classic Mahisti blue-black, the same as his and Zeliha’s.

“And,” Zeliha said, her tone shifting, “I haven’t gotten to talk

to you about what happened at the kahyalar's party when you went for the Visit. You were *very* naughty, I heard."

He nearly choked, and it was only because he was terrified of dropping Eyne that he forced the wave of panic back.

There were times when Kadou acted and only later realized—in a moment of crushing humiliation—how it might look from the outside. He knew that Siranos was suspicious of him—and who could blame him? Siranos's own family had been devastated two generations ago by the machinations of a jealous second son. He had no reason to believe that Kadou would behave any differently—most people in his position, Kadou supposed, *wouldn't* have been joyfully happy to find themselves a step further away from the throne. And besides that, Siranos always seemed to catch him at the worst times and draw precisely the wrong conclusions.

The night of Eyne's birth, Captain Eozena, who had served as a kahya for nearly thirty years, who had saved Kadou's life when he was barely more than a baby, and whom Kadou and Zeliha both trusted above *anyone* (including, possibly, each other)—Captain Eozena, whose loyalty was utterly beyond question, had come to the temple where Kadou was praying in gratitude to give him news about the Shipbuilder's Guild break-in, had asked him to take charge of the matter since Her Majesty was indisposed in childbed, and had escorted him to the royal administrative offices so they could hurriedly scrawl out orders to secure the Guild and limit passage out of the city, buying them time until they could ensure that the crucial secret held within the Guild was secure. It had been past midnight when she had left to see those orders executed. Kadou and Melek, one of the kahyalar assigned to his personal service, had remained behind to search through the files and find out whether any other incidents or concerns had been recently reported by the Guild. They'd been up to their elbows in documents when Siranos had come in, demanded to know what Kadou thought he was doing, and not-quite-accused him of making his move against Her Majesty and his new daughter. Melek had almost had to raise *çir* voice to get him to leave.

No matter that Zeliha had brushed all these incidents off the

very next morning when Kadou reported to her. No matter that she'd cheerfully agreed with Eozena's executive decision to delegate responsibility. Kadou's brain did what it always did with incidents like these—it held tight to it, interrogated it from every angle, worried over it, ate itself up with anxiety until Kadou was a shaking, nervous wreck.

All that would have been fine, but then . . . he'd confided his fears to Tadek. And that was where things had started to go . . . awkward. Awkward, even before this moment, when he looked at it from an outsider's perspective and saw how easily anyone else could conclude that he was having Siranos *tailed*.

Zeliha had a *whole ministry* of professional spies whose job it was to know everything that went on in every corner of the palace, in every alley of Kasaba, and in every village in the country. Of course she knew. Someone would have reported to her that Tadek, who had been assigned to Kadou's personal service last year, had suddenly been asking around about Siranos, about his motives, about any gossip surrounding him. That too would have been forgivable. But Tadek was a kahya of the core-guard, and that meant loyalty, and devotion, and a certain inclination to go above and beyond the call of duty. Tadek—clever Tadek, too cunning for his own good, that expression of sly hazel mischief always sparkling in his eyes—had done just that. He'd asked other questions of his fellow kahyalar as well—questions that Kadou certainly had *not* asked him to investigate and *would not have* asked—and come to Kadou afterward, bearing news and secrets and whispers like guest-gifts when Kadou'd paid his formal visit to the kahyalar's own enormous celebration of the birth of the princess. They had briefly left the courtyard of the garrison for a discreet walk just beyond it. *I know a dozen kahyalar who would happily die for you*, Tadek had murmured to him, as if that was at all what Kadou wanted. Fireworks had been cracking and hissing overhead, reflecting bright off the surface of the garrison's laundry pond as they strolled around it and Tadek whispered all he'd found. *I myself, Highness, would of course lay down my life to protect you without hesitation, particularly from a—well, we can't yet call him a villain, can we?*

Gods, what had he been doing? He'd been gathering spies of his own.

"I'm—I don't—I can't—" He was trembling a little, and Eyne made a soft warning noise. "It's complicated, I swear it's not what it looked like, and I didn't mean anything by it, and—"

"Goodness, take a breath, Kadou!" She was staring at him now. "What in the world is the matter?"

"I'm sorry," he said. His eyes prickled with tears.

Zeliha sat up. "Kadou, goodness, calm yourself. I was only going to—ohhh." She smiled and shook a finger at him. "Clever boy. *You're teasing me*, aren't you?" She sat back again, satisfied. "You're wasted as Duke of Harbors, you know. Maybe General Mirize's lessons on war tactics didn't fall on entirely deaf ears after all."

He breathed, as his sovereign commanded. "I'm not teasing. I'm serious. I—you're right, I made some errors of judgment and I didn't mean anything by it, I should have thought more about how it would seem to other people . . ." He found himself clutching Eyne close. She was oddly comforting to hold.

"Kadou, gods! You're not teasing, are you? Gods, calm down. It was just flirting, right?"

Wait—"What?"

"All right, and drinking. And a very amusing speech, apparently, so well done there. By all accounts it was one of the better speeches we've given at one of their parties. But no one minded the rest of it. Why are you so upset about it?"

She wasn't even talking about Siranos. He breathed again, and it came easier this time. "I—I thought you might have, um, felt like I was behaving disgracefully."

She shrugged again. "There are times for perfect decorum and there are times to, ah, loosen one's sashes. As it were." She shot him a wry sidelong glance, and he felt his face go scarlet and wished his hands were free so he could hide his face. He suspected now that Zeliha had given him an infant to hold for exactly this reason. "Nothing wrong with a moonlit walk around such romantic environs as a laundry pond. But I'd better stop teasing, or you'll

blush so hard you'll have an aneurysm." She dropped her voice. "In all seriousness, though . . . Tadek Hasira? Really?"

He looked back down and found a loose thread to fiddle with on the lace-trimmed hem of Eyne's swaddling. "What about him?"

"You're seeing a lot of him lately. Again. Not *just* moonlit walks, I hear."

"It's not like that."

"*He* seems to think it is. Look, I have no problem with you taking a lover in theory, and if your heart is called—or whatever bit; maybe it's not about hearts—"

"*Zeliha*."

"Sorry, fine, sorry—if your *heart* is called by one of our kahyalar then I trust you're doing your due diligence in having sensible, honest conversations with him about the complex issues that might come up, expectations and so on. My concerns have nothing to do with that. I merely . . . question your taste about this *particular* one."

The low thrum of anxiety he felt every time he thought of Tadek these days—too much initiative, too cunning for his own good, asking questions Kadou didn't want to know the answers to—was enough to quench his blush, at least. "It's not like that anymore. It used to be, and then we . . . stopped. He was reassigned. Now we just . . ." He waved vaguely. "Talk. Sometimes."

Zeliha looked even more dubious. "You're *not* sleeping with him?" Their attachment, such as it was, had been brief. The previous year, Zeliha had just announced her pregnancy, and Kadou had been *wretched* with terror about losing her. Tadek, stationed right at the door of his very chambers, had witnessed him have a few of his episodes of nerves. He had been so *kind* about it, and so warm, and had worked hard to make light of it, to make Kadou smile, to hold his hand and comfort him, and—

They both knew nothing could come of it—they'd even talked about it afterwards, still naked and sticky in Kadou's bed—and Tadek had only laughed off all Kadou's worries and ethical concerns, and had kissed his eyes and told him that he was at His Highness's service for as long as His Highness required and in *whatever* capacity he desired—this last, of course, murmured directly against Kadou's

neck with a slow smile. It had not made Kadou's sense of ethics feel any better to know that Tadek thought of this as part of his service or his duty, but he had been so afraid, and he'd felt so alone, and he had known in his *bones* that he couldn't breathe a word of his little fear-episodes to a single soul. Tadek had been all he'd had, and Kadou had been too desperate for comfort to turn down his offers as he should have. But the months had passed, and eventually it was time for assignments to be shuffled again, and since Kadou had not requested Tadek's attendance to continue, their intimacy had come to a natural end—until Tadek had come across him in another one of his episodes again, and Kadou had given in to yet another moment of weakness and confided in him about Siranos.

"No, I'm not," Kadou said firmly. "I just . . . He's nice." Sometimes. Sort of. He was also catty, a fiend for gossip, and didn't take anything seriously, which was sometimes exasperating, though Kadou felt hideously guilty even thinking such a thing in the privacy of his own mind.

"Nice," she mused. "*He's nice*. The boys must simply swoon for poetry like that. Do they?" She took one look at his face and snorted. "The thunderstorm look is better on you than blushing. Seriously, though—nice? That's the best you can say about him?"

"Well . . ." He fidgeted, shifted Eyne to a better position. He couldn't even answer that in the privacy of his own mind, so how could he explain it to her? It was difficult to give Tadek's words any weight. Words were cheap, and Tadek had so many of them, and he flung them thither and yon like he was feeding chickens. Still, he was essentially a good person, and Kadou liked him. Liked being around him. Liked it when Tadek made him laugh, or took his mind off whatever was troubling him. It was just difficult to navigate any kind of intimate connection with him, not only because of their relative positions, but because it was difficult to figure out what Tadek wanted from him, other than sex. Perhaps he didn't want anything else besides Kadou's good regard, which he would have had anyway.

Perhaps it was similar to whatever Zeliha saw in Siranos. In their positions, having a friend or having a lover were both equally

complicated, so you took what you could get and you didn't ask for anything more than what the person was willing to give you, and when you found someone who saw you and treated you like a *person*, you grabbed hold of that and cherished it.

Zeliha sighed heavily. "You need better standards. Surely there's *someone* in the palace of whom you have a higher opinion than *he's nice*."

"Not really. Not like that."

Zeliha sat up, looking off behind Kadou. "Speaking of lovers. We'll continue this conversation later," she said firmly, and then, "Siranos, welcome. Do join us, won't you?"

Kadou's muscles locked in place.



Zeliha, perhaps sensing a little of the tension between him and Siranos, shoved them out of the pavilion towards their horses as soon as the mistress of the hunt sounded her horn, and said, "Now, look after each other and come back soon."

That rather spoiled Kadou's plans to ride quietly at the back of the hunt and enjoy the scenery and relative solitude. Kadou was obliged to ride beside him, Siranos's guards and his own kahyalar arrayed around them—including, gods help him, Tadek, who gave Kadou a respectful bow and a cheeky wink when their eyes first met, and who ambled right up to Kadou to hold Wing's reins as he mounted up.

"Highness," he murmured. "Are you well?"

"Managing," Kadou said back, softly.

Tadek's bright eyes flicked up to meet his again. Kadou was expecting a wry smirk, a flirtatious comment, but Tadek's glance flicked over to Siranos. "Shall I ride beside you?" Tadek asked lightly. "I have all manner of silly gossip and chatter to fill the air with."

Ah, and there it was—a prime example of why Kadou kicked himself whenever he fell to the temptation of being exasperated with Tadek. The same things that he found so tiresome in some circumstances could be painfully useful in others.

But—he couldn't rely entirely on Tadek, and with the earlier

conversation with Zeliha . . . He suppressed a wince. “Not today,” he whispered. “I ought to make an effort, at least.”

Tadek cast another sharp, assessing glance at Siranos. It made Kadou more nervous than even the most egregious flirting would have. “As you wish, Highness. Just give me a sign if you change your mind. It’s me, Gülpaşa, Balaban, Yulad, and Selçuk at your back today. We asked to be assigned to you specially.”

Just wonderful. The person he had to be most conscientious of and the four staunchest of Kadou’s “supporters,” according to Tadek. It had been such a bad idea to ask for his help with anything covert. Several times now Kadou had attempted to explain to Tadek that he’d had the wrong idea, he’d misunderstood what Kadou was asking of him, but time and again, Tadek’s only response was to clasp Kadou’s hands, kiss his palms, and assure Kadou that he had it all under control. At least today he was behaving more as a kahya should.

Siranos rode a glossy black gelding, a little heavier than Kadou preferred for his hunting horses—Wing was a mare of a delicately built breed from south Qeteren, bred for endurance riding through the foothills of the mountains on the edge of the desert. She was desert-colored too, a shade that Vintish horsemasters called isabelline, a honey-cream that shone like pale gold.

Siranos had said little to him when he had strode up to Zeliha’s pavilion, and he said absolutely nothing to him now. Kadou longed to turn and catch Tadek’s eye, let him fill the air as he’d volunteered to do—undoubtedly he’d have harmless gossip about the results of the recent exams, which of the kahyalar had merited promotion from the fringe-guard to the core-guard and who would be assigned to more direct government service, and so on. He resisted the urge, and so the frosty silence continued, broken only by the jingling of the tack and the crunching of old leaves under the horses’ hooves, the panting of the dogs loping alongside them, and the sounds of other people talking or laughing or singing in the distance.

By their very nature, hunts were often long periods of peace

(or even boredom) followed by a sudden frantic burst of activity. This one was no different—after an hour or more of riding, Kadou caught a flash in the corner of his eye and hauled Wing's head around in the next heartbeat. He shouted to her, to the others, and kicked her sides, and she flung herself forward through the underbrush—it was a grey doe, a little on the small side. Wing was already gaining on her.

One-handed, he unclipped his shortbow, loosened an arrow from the quiver at his hip. He had a clear shot—the underbrush was thinner here, and there was a long stretch of flat ground. The dogs bayed around him, gathering one by one out of the woods to run with them. He hooked Wing's reins over the pommel and stayed seated low in the saddle, nocking the arrow, hooking the string with his draw ring, and pulling to his ear—

Something slammed into him from the side. The arrow slipped and went wide, and the world tipped. Kadou scrambled for the pommel, for the reins, for Wing's mane, and fell heavily to the forest floor. It was by the grace of the gods that his feet didn't get tangled in the stirrups. He lay dazed and winded, shaken to his bones, his bow fallen a few feet away. The dogs, still in pursuit, swarmed around him and leapt over him.

There was a buzzing in his ears, and he heard someone bellow, as if off in the distance. Everything hurt; he couldn't make himself move—he watched Wing slow and stop within four strides, just as she'd been trained . . .

Hooves thudded around him. He heard the twang of bowstrings, the slick shimmering sound of blades drawn from their sheaths, shouting—

“Treason! Treachery!”

He blinked his eyes hard and rolled onto his back. His right arm and side throbbed with pain.

“Stand down!” he heard Tadek shout.

*Oh*, Kadou thought. *Shit*. He pushed himself up just in time to see his kahyalar, all mounted, wheeling around and charging at Siranos and his guards, weapons drawn. In the next heartbeat, before

he could call out, there was the shattering scream of injured horses and soldiers. “Treachery!” someone shouted. “Get him away!” The words were in Oissika—it was one of Siranos’s guards.

Kadou scrambled to his feet. “Hold!” he cried. “Hold!”

Two of the horses were already struggling and falling to their knees, dying on the ground, great saber slashes in their necks pouring blood onto the leaves. Three people fell before his eyes too—he couldn’t see which, just the colors of their uniforms: two Mahisti blue and white, one without uniform—Siranos’s personal retinue. All three bore saber slashes, and one of them had been shot by four arrows—eye, shoulder, chest, side.

Kadou felt sick. Time seemed to be going very slowly. “Hold!” he screamed again. “As you love me, drop your weapons!”

It was pure chance that Tadek turned his horse and saw Kadou. “Highness!” The expression on his face couldn’t have been faked—true relief, true shock, true fear.

Kadou dove forward and seized Tadek’s reins, dragging his horse out of the fray, and shouted again, “*Hold!*” and Tadek joined him then, doubling their volume.

The fighting faltered, and Siranos’s remaining guard fled back in the direction of camp—Siranos himself had already disappeared.

He felt the pain again with every heaving gasp of breath he drew and clamped his hand to his aching side.

Tadek flung himself off his horse and caught Kadou up in his arms. Kadou groaned, sore but not, he thought, badly hurt. Tadek stepped back, his hands fluttering over Kadou’s face, his shoulder and side. His eyes were filling with tears, Kadou noticed distantly. “He drew an arrow, and then—something happened with his horse and he crashed into you. I thought it was intentional—I saw you fall—I thought you were—I swear he had a knife in his hand, I swear it—”

Just a glint of sun on the arrowhead, more likely. “I’m fine,” Kadou said through gritted teeth. “Attend to the others. There’s dead.”

“We have to get you away from them!” Tadek said, shaking his head. “Take your horse, ride for camp, ride for your life—”

“Tadek!” he shouted, and Tadek cringed and subsided. “No one tried to kill me!”

“I know what I saw!”

But even Kadou’s paranoia couldn’t color it—an accident, he was sure of it. Tadek had spent so much time gossiping that he was seeing ghosts where there were none.

He pushed Tadek aside without another glance and limped towards the two fallen kahyalar. His stomach turned again. Balaban and Gülpaşa. He pressed his hand to his mouth and knelt slowly. He touched her face, then Balaban’s.

Dead. Certainly dead—she bore a long slash across her neck. He was the one pincushioned with arrows. He looked across to Siranos’s guard: a young man, younger even than Kadou himself. He didn’t know his name.

He swallowed hard and looked up. The other kahyalar were bloodied. “I’m sorry,” he said, his voice breaking. “It wasn’t—I lost my seat, that’s all. I didn’t . . .”

He couldn’t even blame Tadek for putting the kahyalar on edge.

He’d only been doing what Kadou had told him to do. Kadou had put the idea into his head that Siranos might try to hurt him, and so when a trivial accident had happened, Tadek had seen something much worse. Stupid Tadek, but stupider *him*.

He pushed himself to his feet, wiping the leaves and dirt off his face with the cuffs of his kaftan. His hands were shaking.

They all stood silent until Zeliha’s kahyalar arrived, a tempest of horse and armor, and they were bundled together and hauled back to the palace. Passing through the hunting camp, Kadou saw only pale, distraught faces of the cadets and servants. They were already striking the tents and packing things back into wagons.



Zeliha’s kahyalar led him firmly to the throne room. It was a wide chamber floored in black marble; one of the long sides was open, framed by a series of archways leading out to a covered balcony that looked out over the city far below and the ocean beyond. The throne, an imposing couch wide enough for three to sit

comfortably side by side, stood at the far end of the chamber, blazing gold and white on a raised platform, covered with an awning of thickly embroidered blue velvet, like a more decorated version of the tent at the hunting camp.

Zeliha paced before the platform and turned sharply toward him when her kahya pushed him—pushed him!—in front of her. One look from her and he cringed, drawing in small. “What. Happened.”

“They thought,” he began, but his voice broke and he had to clear his throat. “They thought I was hurt. Dead.”

“Who?”

“My kahyalar.” He bit his lip. “It was just . . . sudden. It happened in—in seconds.” She said nothing, just looked hard at him, like granite, like fire. “It wasn’t Siranos’s fault, you mustn’t blame him. I saw a deer and gave chase, and Siranos was close to me, and his horse—something happened; I don’t know, maybe he lost his balance—I fell off Wing.” He gestured to his clothes, the dirt ground into the fabric, the leaves and grass stains. “My kahyalar were a little farther back and all they saw was the collision, and my fall, and they assumed the worst, I suppose. It was just an accident.”

“It seems awfully convenient,” she said quietly, her voice no less sharp. “No—it seems implausible. *Both* sides of the story do.”

“I don’t know what else to tell you. Tadek—”

“Ah,” she said, “Yes. Tadek. Tadek, who you’re so close to. Let’s talk about Tadek, shall we?” She stepped up to the platform and sat slowly on the throne, drawing one foot up, resting her bent arm on her knee. “You said you and he had stopped being lovers. When *did* the two of you start getting close again?”

“We . . . we just walked by the pond at the kahyalar’s party, you know that part already,” he said. Shit. How much did she know? He should confess the rest. His tongue was like wood in his mouth.

“And what happened there?”

“We talked. He offered to come back to my rooms with me. I said no.”

“You’re leaving something out,” she snarled. “There’s a gap as wide as the sea between declining Tadek’s company for the evening and Tadek flinging himself at my lover and the body-father of my child and screaming about traitors.” She narrowed her eyes. “And I happen to know he had visited your rooms several days earlier, with no message from you. At least, not by any formal channels. It was his day off, and he chose to spend part of it in your chambers. So apparently you weren’t just getting close at the kahyalar’s party. You know, when you said you weren’t sleeping with him, I thought you might be . . . let’s not use the word *lying*. Being discreet.”

“It—it was the night of Eyne’s birth. He saw the fireworks. He was coming to offer his congratulations, that’s all.” And instead of finding Kadou exultant, he’d found him having an episode, one of the worse kind, when the fear came upon him so powerfully that there was nothing he could do but curl into a ball and *shake* until his bones rattled. Maybe Tadek took things more seriously than Kadou thought. He’d been so reassuring in the moment, so Kadou had thought he was dismissing all his worries and had babbled everything just to try to make him understand—about Siranos’s own accusations of treachery earlier that night, about how Siranos had grabbed his arm hard enough to bruise—

“Tell me,” Zeliha said. “Does Tadek hate Siranos, or do you?”

“Neither,” Kadou choked out. “Neither! Tadek is not at fault—”

“If he isn’t, then you are. He was part of your guard. He was acting under your command, and now three people are dead, two more injured. Two horses killed in the fray, two more put out of their misery afterwards. Now, what *happened*?”

“Siranos,” he said. His voice was thick, his throat tight. His hands shook harder than ever. “Eozena came to me at the temple—you weren’t to be disturbed, and there had been the break-in at the Shipbuilder’s Guild—I didn’t know what to do, so I went to your offices, and—and Siranos saw me there and confronted me. He was saying all sorts of things. He thought I was interfering with something. He accused me of—of underhanded behavior for disloyal motives. He was frightened,” Kadou added quickly. “That’s all. He

didn't know why the kahyalar were following my orders—he's Ois-sika, he doesn't understand about—”

“He's not an idiot,” Zeliha snapped. “Why didn't you tell anyone about Siranos's accusations? Why didn't you tell me? Why did you make Melek swear not to speak of it?”

After a long moment, he said, “I told Tadek. I was afraid. Just afraid, that's all. I went back to my chambers, and Tadek arrived unexpectedly, and he made me feel better, and—and I asked him to—he was just trying to protect me.”

“So Tadek does hate Siranos.”

“No!”

“Whatever you said to him,” she said, slow and quiet, “Whatever you said about Siranos, it made Tadek ready to kill him for you. Not just willing, but *ready*. *Prepared*. He was on edge, and it was because of something you said.”

“It's my fault,” Kadou managed, finally. His mouth was dry. “Is that what you want me to say? It is. I know it is, I knew it was from the moment I saw what happened. But it was an accident, I swear it. Sister. Sister, I swear to you, I never wanted anyone to be hurt. By the heavens and the seas, I swear it.”

“And yet you kept secrets from me. You didn't trust me.”

“I'm sorry.” He wiped the tears from his face. “I should have told you, I should have trusted you, but—”

“But what?”

“I thought it would be a burden,” he whispered. “You're very busy, and with Eyne, and . . . and I thought maybe you shared Siranos's opinion of me. I thought maybe he was right, maybe I was too far out of line. But I would never, ever hurt you. You're my *sister*.”

She sighed and stood again, walking to the balcony, her hands clasped behind her back. “I do not share Siranos's opinion of you, and I have told him so. Siranos has spoken to me several times about his concerns regarding you and your position. I am not unfamiliar with them, particularly not in the time since Eyne was born. I thought it enough to brush him off. Now I see that was *not* enough. It was never going to be enough.” She paced along the

length of the balcony and back. Kadou wasn't sure if he should follow her or stay. He stayed. "He found your behavior objectionable and suspicious. He thought you were skulking—that was the word he used—and I said you were simply doing as duty commanded.

"The two of you have put me into an uncomfortable and unfortunate position. If I do not address these problems, they will grow—you and I both know they will. Our tutors made *sure* we knew. You have power by your birth; he has some by Eyne's, for better or worse, regardless of whether I grant him claim on her. If I could go back nine months, I would tell myself not to get so . . . fixated on one person. I would tell myself to visit another lover, or two, to confuse the issue. It would have been better. Cleaner. But I acknowledged Siranos as the body-father, and now he has a few threads of natural claim on Eyne, even if none of them are recognized in the eyes of the law or the gods." She turned on her heel, the skirts of her short kaftan swinging wide around her knees, the leather soles of her embroidered slippers hushing against the floor. "So. Something must be done while the problem is small and manageable, before it gets even more gruesome than it already is." She shot him a glance. "Before it gets any more like what happened to Siranos's own family in his grandfather's youth."

Kadou dropped his eyes to the floor. A jealous younger brother had happened. It was no wonder Siranos hated him.

"I won't stand to have childish squabbles in my court turning into a matter of blood and live steel. I won't stand to see factions this potentially severe breaking out in front of my eyes. But how do I solve it without breaking my relationships with my brother and with the body-father of my heir?" She didn't seem to be looking for an answer; she didn't even seem to be speaking directly to him anymore. "The answer lies, I think, in showing restraint where neither you nor Siranos have done so. Perhaps it is understandable that such unpleasantness, to use poetic understatement, might break out. Tensions have been running high. Things are new and different for all of us now—I've only been sultan for, what, two years? And now Eyne. So perhaps the thing to do, before I take

any drastic measures, is to deal with the root of the problem: The tension. The chaos.” She turned again and looked right at Kadou. “You need some time. You’ve never been comfortable in court, and I can’t imagine that all this reshuffling of positions and responsibilities has been easy on you. So! I would strongly, strongly suggest that you take a vacation. Maybe spend the summer at the hunting lodge in the mountains. Get away from it all, get some peace and quiet and fresh air. I’ll see that there are people to attend to any of your business in the city.”

“You’re sending me away,” Kadou said. He felt . . . blank. Blank, but for an ache where his heart was supposed to be. “You’re . . . exiling me?”

“Exile is a very strong word,” Zeliha said, raising one finger. “And that’s not what I’m doing. But you’re responsible for three deaths, Kadou,” she said. “This decision is borne of my own selfishness. If I were a better monarch, I would punish you more harshly.” She scowled at him.

“I didn’t mean for anyone to be hurt. I was only afraid.”

“If you’re so afraid of Siranos that you are jumping at shadows and not trusting me to keep you safe, then you need something else to occupy your attention.”

“I’m still responsible for the investigation—the Shipbuilder’s Guild—”

“Lieutenant Armagan has it well under control,” she snapped. “And I’m sure we could manage it without your oversight. So why, pray tell, do you need to be in the palace?”

There was one benefit to chronic cowardice, and that was that he had an intimate relationship with fear. For as many times as his nerves had screamed in panic at him that there was some imminent disaster happening around him, it meant that now, in a *real* moment of catastrophe, when he looked for an inward place of calm, he found it. As if the very fact that the terrible thing *wasn’t* just in his own imagination was a comfort and a relief—he could work with that.

“It won’t look good,” he said. “If anyone finds out I’ve gone—

they won't know what you said in here." His voice shook just a little, but not nearly as much as he expected it to. Thank goodness this was real. It was something he could put his hands on and fight against, instead of just a pressing sense of aimless dread. "If it looks like you've sent your little brother into exile, and it sounds like it, and the effect is the same . . ."

Her glare sharpened. "That's *not* what I'm doing."

"How many kahyalar know about what happened today? All of them will, if they don't already. One thousand, three hundred and seven in the palace, and that's not counting the cadets. Their families will know about this by dinnertime, their neighbors by lunch tomorrow, the city by breakfast the day after. It's a very bad situation. I'm responsible. But if you send me away, it will be so much worse. It will look like—"

"Like we're weak?" she snapped. "Like my brother and the body-father of the heir were conspiring against each other right under my nose?"

"Zeliha," he whispered. He wanted so badly for her to be his *sister* now, instead of his sultan. "The first lesson."

Three words to stop her in her tracks.

She let out a long, slow breath.

"Do you remember how old we were?" he asked. "I don't remember much of it."

"I was nine. You were five," she said through gritted teeth. "You were too young for that lesson, but you begged and begged to come and I couldn't shake you off my sleeve. And you regretted it after, didn't you? You cried for days."

"The first lesson: Don't use power impulsively or in anger," Kadou said. "Like sticking your hand into a fire and the people smaller and weaker than you get burned."

"You're not so much smaller or weaker than I am," she said flatly.

"The kahyalar are. Their families are." Her eye twitched. "Send me away and you'll have punished me and satisfied your anger, and I'll be miserable. But you know as well as I do that if there are consequences, *we* won't be the ones suffering for them. What if—what

if N'gaka thinks we're weak and distracted, and decides to break our alliance and invade? In a war, thousands die before we do."

She scoffed. "An unlikely scenario."

"Yes, but not impossible. We have no idea how this will affect anything. We have no way of predicting it, and there are far too many pieces on the chessboard for us to estimate the cost. We are the descendants of merchants—are you willing to buy something without knowing the price of it?" Had he convinced her? Was this line of argument working at all? Would it have been better to cling to her sleeve and weep and beg, like he was five again? That had worked all through their childhood. It might well work again. "Please," he said, because he couldn't resist trying. "Please. You may give me whatever punishment you want. But keep it a family matter, as much as we can."

"A family matter," she said, incredulous. "Involving two dead kahyalar, a dead Oissika and several more injured ones—you know the Oissic ambassador is already furious with me."

"All the more reason to not make this a national incident," he said quickly. "Between the counterfeits and the Shipbuilder's Guild, there's already too many fires to put out. Tell the ambassador it was a hunting accident, and that we mourn the one who died and—and we'll send money to his family and honor him equally alongside our fallen kahyalar."

"And Siranos?" she said. "What's your great plan for him?"

*Oh, by all means send him away*, his mind suggested with a manic kind of brightness. "Restrict him to the Gold Court." The innermost area of the palace, residence of only the royal family and the highest ranking courtiers when they visited from the country. "It's—it's house arrest, but it'll look like an honor."

"They'll think I intend to give him claim on Eyne," she said coldly. "He will think he's being rewarded."

"If you send him away but not me, he'll go home to Oissos, and he'll probably be as upset and angry to be sent away as I would be. His family is wealthy—they might be offended to be snubbed, and if they have connections . . . it could damage our relationship with Oissos. You . . ." He winced. "You have to keep both of us near you."

"I don't want to see either of your faces right now," she spat. "Men! Fools and idiots!"

"I'm sorry."

"And what's *your* punishment?"

"I'll pay for all the funerals. I'll send the consolation purses, both to the fallen guard and to the injured ones. I'll . . . apologize to Siranos."

"And that's supposed to convince me that you've learned anything?" she said. "What about your punishment for mistrusting me, for keeping things from me, for your *own* part in weakening the family?"

He cringed. "Is there *any* punishment that could fit those crimes without injuring us further?"

They were both silent for a long time. He dropped his eyes to the floor; he could almost feel her anger, barely banked, still burning at the edges of him. At length, she stalked over to the gold-inlaid divan and sat. "Come here." She gestured to the floor at her feet. "There is another matter."

He obeyed, sitting near her. Another time, she would have given him one of the cushions, and he might have lounged comfortably against the side of the throne. Another time, she might have invited him to sit beside her. A knot of dread twisted through his already soured stomach. "What other matter?"

"Tadek."

His blood went cold. "You were right. Anything he did was under my orders," he blurted. "I take responsibility for that too."

"Did you tell him to meddle with the kahyalar? Did you tell him to raise support for you?"

"No. No, of course not, he—he was just overenthusiastic. I wasn't clear about what I was asking of him, and . . . It's my fault. It is." When someone pledged you their service, when they showed that they really were quite serious about their willingness to lay their life down for yours, that required a certain amount of care in return. Tadek had tried, genuinely, to protect him. Kadou was bound by oath and by honor to do the same. "What's going to happen to him?"

“Court martial,” Zeliha said. All the fiery anger had run out of her voice—now she just sounded tired. “There will have to be an inquest.”

Kadou’s breath caught.

“There’s not much of a choice,” she continued. “Depending on the outcome . . . The best he can hope for, the absolute, *absolute* best, is a dismissal without dishonor. More likely, *with* dishonor. Even more likely is imprisonment—he’s been a kahya of the core-guard. He has certainly been privy to secrets we wouldn’t want wandering out in the general population. And at worst? If things go poorly and he speaks unwisely, or if we uncover anything uglier . . . execution.”

Kadou closed his eyes. “Majesty. Sister. Please, I’ll take any punishment you give me, and I’ll do it gracefully and honorably, but . . .” He swallowed, and shifted onto his knees facing Zeliha and into more formal speech. He bent to press his forehead to the floor in supplication, as he had to the goddess in her temple the night Eyne was born. “Please, Majesty, please allow me to beg mercy on his behalf. He was acting under my command, with only the information I gave him, and I believe with all my heart that he thought he was acting in accordance with the oaths he swore as a kahya.”

“Kadou,” Zeliha said, pained and regretful as if she were about to explain to him that his request was impossible.

“Majesty,” he choked. Now he had to frame it thus: as a boon he begged of his *sovereign* rather than his sister. “*Please.*”

“Sit up, Your Highness,” she said softly, and with a pang in his heart, he knew she understood. He obeyed, keeping his eyes downcast. His hands trembled and he clenched them on his knees.

“Majesty, there is precedent,” he said, speaking quickly. “In the hundred and seventeenth year of the Ahak dynasty, one of the provincial governors—” His voice cracked and he almost expected her to interrupt, to be dry at him for citing their tutors’ lessons at her, but she said nothing, only let him collect himself and speak again: “One of the provincial governors heard that several of his subordinates had plotted to steal grain from the sultan’s tax caravan, but

that they had been apprehended. He begged the sultan to lay their lives in his hands, and Sultan Tamas granted his request, and the criminals were moved to reform themselves and served faithfully for many years after . . ." He trailed off.

She didn't say anything for a long time. "You would have me lay Tadek's life in your hands?"

"He doesn't deserve to die for this, Your Majesty. The responsibility is mine," he whispered. "*Please.*"

"If I grant your request, he will be dismissed from the kahyalar corps. He will be yours entirely, your sworn armsman. He will be paid, clothed, boarded, and fed from your household's coffers, and he will enjoy none of the benefits of his former station."

"Understood," Kadou said quietly. He'd asked for Tadek's life laid in his hands—he hadn't expected it to be weightless.

"Kadou," Zeliha said again, in an entirely different tone. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"He was a fool. He will continue being a fool."

"I can't abandon him," he said more firmly. "I won't. If things had been different, then we'd be calling him a hero now."

He glanced up just in time to see Zeliha roll her eyes. "Oh, of course, there's no difference between a fool and a hero besides everything else in the world around them. What wisdom." She was silent again for a time. "Fine. His life is yours. Make of him what you will. Or what you can."

He slumped with relief. "Thank you."

"You'd both do well to look for better influences," she said, and then paused. "Ah."

"What?"

She tapped her fingertips on her knee. "I'm thinking of punishments. Your personal guard needs to be reassigned, I think. I wonder if Captain Eozena would have time to supervise. You've already been working with her for the Shipbuilder's Guild investigation. Keep doing that and she can easily keep an eye on you for me."

If it had been anyone else, he might have resented it more. All

the kahyalar were considered family, in theory, but with Eozena it was real. She was warm and familiar, solid. She was a lifeline: real and incontrovertible proof that Zeliha saw a constructive way forward and wouldn't change her mind later, sending him away or cutting him out of the family for good. Once, when he'd been little more than an infant, Eozena had saved his life, pulling him out of a fountain that he'd toddled into. His earliest memory was of struggling in the water, and her strong hands plunging through the surface, and her warm skin as she held him very close against her neck and cuddled him until he breathed again and then as he cried.

"She's loyal and steady," Zeliha said, clearly warming to her idea. "She has nearly thirty years of irreproachable service—you'll do well with someone really sensible to talk to, someone you can trust and who won't let your foolishness hold your common sense hostage. You know her, I know her, we both trust her. Don't we?"

Kadou could only nod. She wouldn't lead him wrong. Sooner that the sun would rise in the west. Sooner that the sea wall would crumble into the waves before Eozena let him misstep again.

"But she doesn't have time to hang around you every moment of the day, and she's not a common kahya anyway. She has important things to do besides watch over you. You need a new primary. Not Tadek, of course."

"Melek's my primary right now," he said.

"Melek is sweet and gullible," Zeliha said. "Çe won't do at all. You need an anchor. Someone . . . rule-oriented. Disciplined. Someone who will be a good example to Tadek of what he should have been as a kahya." She tapped her fingers once again. "Do you know Evemer Hoşkadem?"