

Prologue

Twelve Years Ago

Small feet pattered swiftly across the marble floor. With a painful squeaking sound, the young girl skidded to a halt at the top of the stairs and proceeded to practically fly down them, the hem of her dress fluttering behind her. Her shoulder length black hair was dragged out of her face by the force of her momentum, chocolate brown eyes sparkling with excitement in a honey-hued face.

Leaping the last three steps, she stumbled a little on the smooth marble floor of the large entrance hall, but regained her balance with relative ease. Then she was off again, sprinting across the wide foyer and out through the huge front doors. They were easily as tall as three of the tallest men, and wide enough for an elephant to pass through with ease. Thankfully, today they were standing open, so the little girl wasn't hampered in her attempt to reach the palace gates.

The fine-grained gravel of the sweeping pathway that lead to the gates hurt her small, sensitive feet, but not enough to deter her from sprinting down towards the gates, where she could see the figure she was dying to see. A few more meters, and she was close enough to call out. "Daddy! Daddy!" She cried, waving. Stumbling a little, she continued full pelt towards the gates and her father stopped, beaming widely, and knelt down with open arms.

The little girl flew into her father's waiting embrace, and he lifted her into the air, spinning her around and greeting her in the language of his home, which the girl understood, but still had some trouble speaking. "Arrytha, Kessh'sya!"

The greeting was so familiar to the little girl, she didn't even need to translate it to understand. Her father always called her that; his little Kess. "I'm not so little anymore, daddy." She protested with a pout, and her father laughed. She loved when her dad laughed. It was a warm, rich sound, straight from the heart.

"True!" He agreed, pulling her close and settling her on his hip. "You're five now." He stated, and Kess felt a warm glow at the fact he had remembered that she had indeed turned five only a couple of weeks ago. She nodded happily, beaming with pride, and her father laughed again. "Why, in my country, you'd have been gifted with your first weapon already."

"Really?!" Kess breathed with excitement. She loved the stories her father would tell her of the strange customs of his home, the strange animals that made their home there, and the strange myths and legends they had crafted. "What sort of weapon?" She asked.

Her father nodded sagely, and with the hand not holding Kess against his side, he reached into his bag. Kess felt her heart leap with excitement. He had brought her a present! She had so hoped he had, but she hadn't got around to asking yet. After a moment, he pulled out the most beautiful object Kess had ever seen. It was a dagger, simple in design, but all the more beautiful for it. Its hilt was wrapped in black leather, the pommel carved to resemble a lily in bloom, while the hand-guard was in the shape of a bird's wings, spread wide. The sheath was also black leather, embossed with a swirling, flame-like design in gold-leaf.

Her father presented it to her, and Kess took it in her tiny hands. It was a bit big for her, but that didn't stop her from carefully sliding the blade from its sheath. It was double-bladed, and shimmered silver-white in the sunlight. There was something carved lightly in the neat, swirling script of her father's home down the center of the blade. "This is the

traditional gift, though I had it stylised specifically for you, Kessh'sya." He told her warmly as Kess gazed at the blade with undiluted awe and excitement. "Keep it with you at all times, Kessh'sya, and it will keep you safe from harm, should I or your mother be unable to reach you."

Kess gazed up at her father at that, with wide innocent eyes. "Mamma says that to carry a weapon is to invite attack." She said, not because she agreed, but because she wanted her father to confirm her view that it was better to be safe than sorry.

"Ah, but Niosh'rya carries a weapon on her all the time." Her father whispered conspiratorially. Kess, not even batting a lash at the endearment that meant 'the other half of my soul and heart', leaned closer, hoping for a secret. "If her wicked sharp tongue isn't a weapon, I don't know what is."

A laugh escaped Kess, but she clapped a hand to her mouth quickly when she saw her mother standing only a few paces away, one perfectly plucked golden-blonde eyebrow raised, a small smirk curling one corner of her lips. "Delryn. Have you been giving our daughter weapons?" She asked coldly.

Delryn made a show of cringing visibly before turning slowly on the spot to face his wife. "...Yes, dear?" He said tentatively, with a hopeful smile.

Rolling her eyes, the Queen stepped forwards and brought both her husband and daughter into an embrace. "Fine, fine. I understand. But you're not to use it, Kesshi, you hear me?" She said sternly, pulling back to fix Kess with a stern look.

Kess pouted, frowning in stubbornness and clutching her new dagger to her chest. "But it's meant to protect me! If I can't use it, it won't protect me!" She explained, as if her mother hadn't grasped the concept. "Besides, I'm a *big girl* now, and big girls are allowed to carry weapons! Daddy said so!" She protested.

"Delryn!" Queen Nioka exclaimed in exasperation. "What have you been telling her? She's five! She can't be expected-"

Her husband's almost-black eyes went serious, and she stopped, recognising that look. It was the look Delryn wore when he knew something was important. "I understand, Niosh'rya, that you have different customs here. Your monarchy isn't expected to fight, nor are your women. I understand." He assured her, and Nioka frowned, waiting for the point. "I do understand, but Kesshi is also my daughter, also part of my culture, and this dagger is a part of her heritage. She doesn't have to learn to use it if she doesn't want to, she has that choice, but it is her choice if she wants to learn to defend herself. She may not be able to rely on the palace guard or the Valian army to protect her all the time."

Kess listened to this with a mounting sense of responsibility. Her father was right, she couldn't rely on other people to protect her. Besides, she wanted to learn to use the dagger. It was the most beautiful thing she'd ever set eyes on, including all those paintings and statues and illuminated scrolls her mother and the Ladies of the Court gushed over. She felt like it had so many secrets, secrets it would share with her if only she could learn to wield it.

Her mother was saying something, perhaps she was arguing, perhaps she was setting conditions for her defeat, but either way, Kess interrupted. "I wanna learn to use it." She stated in the stubborn way that seems inherent in children.

"Kesshi!" Her mother protested, looking indignant, but there was a resigned look in her eyes. She knew she had lost this battle, but she would go down fighting. "You're *five*. We'll put it on the wall for now, and you can have it back when you're thirteen!"

"No." Kess and her father said together.

"Oh, be reasonable, Delryn! She's going to put her eye out with that thing the first time she tries to use it!" Nioka insisted, beyond frustrated by her stubborn husband and

daughter, not realising that Kess had gotten most of her utter stubbornness from her.

The Queen was surprised when Delryn smiled warmly at her. "You need not worry, Niosh'rya." He said, stressing the endearment he had attached to her name, and making her flush slightly with the sincerity in his voice. "Kessh'sya has the blood of the Kevatha'dral in her. She won't be wounded by her own weapon. Fighting is in her blood."

Nioka sighed, her shoulders slumping and a deeply worried look appearing on her face. Her eyes were sad when she spoke, and her voice was low and quiet, but still smooth and strong. "That's what I'm worried about."

Chapter 1

Freedom?

"Goodness, Kesshi! What are you wearing?!" The startled yelp caused Kess to scowl at the offending girl as she entered the stables. She was a pretty young woman, in her own way, with sharp features that matched her sharp demeanour. Her well defined cheek-bones, perfectly straight nose, arched eyebrows and ice-blue eyes all added to the feel that she was all angles. She was taller than Kess, but not by much, and used that height to her advantage. Her hair was pulled back into a tight, intricate knot at the back of her head, and was decorated with precious gems, just like the hems of her dress, which was a rich, royal purple in colour.

Swallowing back a sharp retort, Kess stalked over to her horse and stroked the large battle-charger's nose. "Hello, there, Tempest." She breathed fondly to the stallion. It whickered softly and snorted into the feathers of hair that surrounded her face. It was longer than it had been in her youth, and she had to plat it to keep it out of her face. She barely ever let it down, and today would not be one of those rare exceptions. Calmed by Tempest's presence and affection, she turned her head to look at her companion, who was still eyeing her choice of clothing critically.

Unlike the other girl, Kess had forgone the gown, and instead gone with the more practical choice of a pair of leather trousers and sturdy leather boots in a dark brown and a woven top in mossy green, with leather arm-guards and chest padding; her typical riding gear. "I assume it's the leather trousers you have issue with, Jade?" She asked through clenched teeth. "And it's Kess, if you don't mind."

"It most certainly is! What sort of image do you think you'll be giving dressed like that, Kesshi? I'll be ashamed to be seen with you!" Jade protested, utterly ignoring Kess's directions regarding her name.

Kess growled low in her throat like an animal, and Jade stepped backwards, looking alarmed. "I think I'll look like I can actually ride a horse, not like I'm just pretending for the sake of looking sophisticated." She snapped, moving round Tempest, who had already been tacked up by a stableboy, and swinging herself into the saddle. "Let me remind you, Jade, that you invited me on this little trip." She added.

Pulling herself together and standing a little taller in an attempt to convey superiority, which completely didn't work with Kess towering above her on Tempest's back, Jade sniffed delicately and turned her back on Kess. She tensed at the unconscious insult, and Tempest whinnied aggressively and sidestepped awkwardly, sensing his rider's anger. Forcing herself to relax, Kess patted Tempest's neck and murmured an apology. "Don't be so hasty, Kesshi." Jade said coldly. "We have to wait for Miirafey and Alyss, you know." She pointed out.

"Yeah, yeah, I know." Kess agreed, rolling her eyes and continuing to stroke Tempest's neck to keep him calm. He was a spirited beast, and standing still when Kess was on his back did not sit well with him. He wanted to be off, charging over plains and breaking shield-walls. Kess had to admit that she felt the same.

Just as Jade was beginning to get impatient, Tempest's ears pricked up and a moment later Kess, too, heard the sound of voices approaching. Into the stable walked two more young women. The first, bouncing excitedly and beaming once she spotted Jade and Kess, was Miirafey. Kess recognised her from the banquet last night when they had been

introduced to one another. She thought she might have met her before that, at some social inter-country function, but she couldn't really be sure.

Miirafey was a stocky, slightly plump girl, with rounded cheeks, full lips and wide light green eyes. She was undeniably pretty in a cute, adorable sort of way, with her dark freckles and soft features. Her hair, a rich chestnut brown, was much longer than Kess had ever managed to grow hers, reaching Miirafey's waist with ease in loose curls. She, too, was dressed in a gown of silk and lace and gems, her hair woven with strings of pearls.

Behind her walked a petite girl Kess knew to be Alyss. She had the stereotypical features of a princess, with delicate features and the kind of face that instantly makes you like her. Her smile, which was soft and shy, was infectious, and on the rare occasion that her intelligent grey eyes were to actually meet one's gaze, the turning over of a dozen clever little ideas in her mind would be visible. Her light blonde hair was pulled back in a simple, but elegant twisted ponytail that just barely reached the nape of her rather long neck. Yet again, she had chosen a dress over more practical clothing, but Kess had to give her credit for forgoing the jewellery and sticking to simple dress with a tight-fitted bodice and a loose skirt.

"Ah, you're here." Jade said with fake warmth and a polite smile.

Miirafey went straight to her own horse and began cooing over the docile mare in sweet, babyish tones after exchanging the barest of greetings with Jade. Alyss, on the other hand, bowed slightly, hiding her face. "I'm terribly sorry we're late." She apologised softly.

"It's quite alright, Alyss." Jade replied, and though her voice was still stern, it was noticeably softer than Kess had ever heard it before. "But let us be off, before we run out of time." She stated, turning on her heel and striding purposefully over to her own horse, she mounted it in a perfectly textbook way. The others were less adept than Jade and Kess, but soon the four of them were on their way out of the palace stables and through the city.

Unused to the slow pace and the crowded streets, Tempest sidled and snorted and often threatened to rear up and cause panic, but Kess kept control, even though she too was itching to be out of the confines of the city where she could let loose and she and Tempest could charge across open plains together.

The extravagant buildings gave way to neater homes, which then faded into ramshackle huts. Those, in their turn, petered out and left the four riders making their stately way along a broad track in a well-light, widely spaced forest. Kess released the reigns, fully confident that she could control Tempest with just her knees, and thrust her fists in the air. "Freedom!" She declared. As if in response to her cheer, Tempest reared up on his hind legs and neighed loudly in challenge. Kess leaned easily into the movement and laughed aloud, digging her heels into Tempest's flank as she grabbed the reigns again.

"Kesshi!" The cry was echoed on three fronts, once in fear, once in shock and once in surprise, but Kess barely heard her three companions, for Tempest had lurched forwards, his hooves thudding into the ground before he was flying forwards in a controlled canter.

Soon, she was out of sight, and the others exchanged looks. Miirafey giggled a little, sounding somewhere between nervous and amused, but Jade shot her an exasperated look. "Kesshi is so reckless." She tutted, and Alyss nodded her agreement, though her expression was thoughtful rather than disapproving.

"If we don't want to lose her, we ought to hurry." Alyss stated quietly after a moment.

"You're right." Jade agreed, spurring her horse into a gentle canter. The other two quickly matched their pace to hers. "I don't know what she thinks she's doing." Jade said,

speaking a little louder to be heard. "She's acting so undignified. I hope she doesn't do anything truly embarrassing." She announced.

Miirafey smiled widely. "Don't worry, Jade. Kesshi knows better than to do anything that would ruin this for you." She said confidently. "She might be kinda gross about some things, but she does care." She added cheerily.

Jade nodded. "I know. You're right, Miirafey. I just really don't want anything to go wrong. This marriage is so important for my country, so I want everything to go perfectly." She announced, scowling at the path ahead of her, where Tempest's tracks were clearly visible in the dark loam. "If I appear anything other than completely infallible, Prince Xavier will automatically assume he can walk all over me. If he sees Kesshi, my guest, acting..." Jade winced as she thought of Kess's behaviour. "-acting like- like a *barbarian!*"

"We know, Jade." Alyss said soothingly. "And so does Kesshi... deep down."

"You think." Jade mumbled, but over the wind of their speed, the others didn't hear her, for which she was grateful. It wouldn't do to have the others hear her being so petulant, like a child. She really must pull herself together.

They rode for maybe an hour of more, before they caught up with Kess, who had come to a stop by the shore of a wide lake, glittering crystalline blue in the midday sun. Tempest was grazing in the shade of the trees, but Kess was down by the water with her boots off and her trousers rolled up, splashing in the shallows.

Tutting at the utter uncouthness of it all, Jade slowed her steed to a halt and dismounted with grace and poise. Making doubly sure that every movement was precisely where it should be, She tethered her horse and pulled a packed lunch out of one of the saddlebags, along with a gilded cushion on which to sit. Arranging herself near the lake, but not so close as to be in danger of getting wet from Kess's splashing, Jade folded her hands in her lap and contented herself with watching the scenery shift slowly around her.

Alyss settled beside her on her own cushion, with a book in hand, a small, contented smile on her face. While she made idle conversation with Miirafey, Jade kept an eye on Kess, who had pulled a knife out of god knows where and was standing very still in the water. Suddenly, Kess lunged, plunging her knife into the water, and when she drew it out again, there was a wriggling fish impaled on the end. Jade gasped, feeling rather affronted at such behaviour in her presence, and gritted her teeth against her anger. Miirafey frowned in concern, then turned to look over her shoulder. She too, gasped, and clapped a hand to her mouth in shock.

Oblivious to the disgusted reactions of her companions, or just pretending to be, Kess walked over to a small cluster of rocks and began, as far as Jade could tell, gutting and de-scaling the fish. Now her stomach turned over and she felt nauseous. "Kesshi! Stop it!" Miirafey cried, and Alyss finally looked up from her book to see what was going on. For a moment, she seemed confused, but then understanding dawned in her eyes and she went a delicate shade of green.

Looking over, Kess frowned. "I can't. If I don't make use of it now that I've killed it, that's just rude." She stated bluntly, going back to butchering the fish with her knife.

"Not stopping would be rude to *us!*" Jade snapped, as Miirafey cast Alyss a worried look.

Kess didn't stop in her work. "Yeah... see... honestly, I care more about not offending a dead fish than I do about not offending you." She pointed out with casual cruelty.

Jade swelled up with indignant fury, and she stood with slow, deliberate movements. "Kesshi Faikana. You are an insufferable barbarian and if you act even half as rude as you are

doing now at my wedding, I will personally make your life a living hell!" She declared.

"Why do you even care?" Kess demanded, her frustration showing through in the way her movements with her knife become more jerky and violent. "It's not like it's a special day to celebrate your love or anything. You met the guy *once!*"

"I care because it's a good match." Jade said imperiously.

"A good match?!" Kess yelled, spinning round. Jade took an involuntary step back, even though there was still a good distance between herself and Kess. The knife in Kess's hand looked like a formidable weapon, thrown or held in Kess's hand. "You can't say that when you don't know him! You don't love him! Why would you bind your *heart and soul* to a man you don't love?!"

"I may not love him, but I do love my country and my people!" Jade snapped back, crossing her arms over her chest and lifting her chin a little.

Kess looked as if she were seriously considering punching Jade, but after a moment, she reigned in her more violent impulses and settled for yelling. "Then marry *them!*" She snapped, throwing her arms in the air. Jade flinched as the sunlight glinted off the knife in Kess's hand. "Oh, for heaven's sake! I'm not going to try and stab you, you know!" She growled.

"Really?" Jade checked coldly.

Kess gave an inarticulate scream. "Gah! Of course not! I might not get along with you, Jade, but I don't wish you dead!"

"What makes you think you can kill me?" Jade demanded arrogantly.

All the anger drained out of Kess and she raised her eyebrows at Jade. When all that got her was another arrogant tilt of the chin, she snorted in dry amusement. "Do you see any palace guards around here?" She asked. "Now, even if it was three against one... *I* know how to handle every weapon in a standard palace armoury. *I'm* the one with a weapon. *I'm* the one with training. *I'm* the one with a battle charger. *I'm* the one wearing practical clothing. And you think you could best me in a toe-to-toe fight?" She asked coolly, almost smirking. Jade faltered a little, but before she could think of something to say, Kess sighed and shook her head. "I have been taught how to act in a court, you know." She said with a roll of her eyes, turning away from the others. Jade decided that was as close to a promise as she was going to get from Kess, and sat down again with a sigh.

"So, um...!" Miirafey began brightly, clearly trying to break the lingering tension. "Do you know what you're wearing for your wedding yet, Jade?" She asked, and the conversation resumed, with Alyss putting in the occasional comment this time as she had put away her book in favour of actually getting to know her companions better.

"Yes. I picked out the dress a few days before you arrived." Jade explained, closing her eyes in an attempt to block out thoughts of Kess. "It still needs to be fitted properly, though." She added. Taking a moment to run through her mental checklist, she continued. "I'm doing that tomorrow."

"Ooh, you must be so excited!" Miirafey gushed, beaming widely.

Jade smiled and nodded, but the smile was so false it hurt. "Yes." She agreed without feeling. "I am a bit excited." *And a lot cross*, she added in her mind.

