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MAKHI KIR-TABAN, BORN OF HEAVEN, was a queen from a long line of queens.

And they were all fools, she thought, her pulse quickening as she read the invitation in her hand. If they hadn't been fools, I wouldn't be in this predicament right now.

No rage showed on her face. No blood rushed to her smooth cheeks. She was a queen and conducted herself accordingly—back erect, body poised, expression composed. Her fingers did not tremble, though every muscle in her body longed to crush the elegantly lettered paper to dust.

King Nikolai Lantsov, Grand Duke of Udova, sole sovereign of the great nation of Ravka, and Princess Ehri Kir-Taban, Daughter of Heaven, most Ethereal of the Taban Line, would welcome Queen Makhi Kir-Taban to a celebration of matrimony in the royal chapel of Os Alta.

The wedding would take place one month from now. Enough time for Makhi's servants to pack the appropriate gowns and jewels; to assemble her royal retinue, to ready her contingent of the Tavgharad, the elite soldiers who had guarded her family since the first Taban queen took the throne. Plenty of time to make the journey over land or in the new luxury airship her engineers had constructed.

Plenty of time for a clever queen to start a war.

But right now, Makhi had to perform for the ministers arrayed before her in the council chamber. Her mother had passed only a month ago. The crown could have returned to Makhi's grandmother, but Leyti Kir-Taban was nearly eighty and was done with the troubles of running a nation. She wanted only to prune her roses and rusticate with a series of wildly handsome lovers, and so she had given Makhi her blessing and retired to the country. Makhi had been crowned scant days after her mother's funeral. Her reign was a new one, but she intended to ensure it was long. She would usher in an age of prosperity and empire for her people—and that required the support of the royal ministers currently gazing up at her, their faces full of expectation.

"I see no personal message from Ehri," she said, leaning back on her throne. She rested the invitation in her lap and allowed her brow to furrow. "It is a concern."

"We should be rejoicing," said Minister Nagh. He wore the dark green, brass-buttoned coat of the bureaucrat class—as all the ministers did, the two crossed keys of the Shu pinned at their lapels. They looked like a forest of stern trees. "Is this not the result we hoped for? A wedding to seal an alliance between our nations?"

The result you hoped for. You would have us cower behind our mountains forever.

"Yes," she said with a smile. "It is why we risked our precious

Princess Ehri in such a savage land. But she should have written a note to us in her hand, given some sign that all is well.”

Minister Zihun cleared her throat. “Your Most Celestial Highness, Ehri may not actually be happy, but only resigned to this. She has never wanted a public life, let alone a life led away from the only home she has ever known.”

“We are Taban. What we want is what our country needs.”

The minister bowed her head respectfully. “Of course, Your Majesty. Shall we pen your reply?”

“I will do it myself,” said the queen. “As a sign of respect. It’s best we begin this new partnership on the right foot.”

“Very good, Your Majesty,” Nagh said, as if Makhi had executed a particularly fine curtsy.

Somehow the minister’s approval made Makhi prickly even more than his opposition.

She rose and, as one, the ministers took a step back, following protocol. She descended from her throne, and her Tavgharad guards fell into step behind her as she made her way down the long hallway that led to the queen’s sanctuary. The silk train of her gown sighed against the marble floor, as fretful as one of her advisers. Makhi knew exactly how many steps it took to reach the privacy of her rooms from the council chamber. She had made the walk innumerable times with her mother, and her grandmother before that. Now she counted down—fifty-six, fifty-five—trying to release her frustration and think clearly.

She sensed Minister Yerwei behind her, though the sound of his slipped feet was masked by the rhythmic thump of Tavgharad boots. It was like being pursued by a ghost. If she told her guards to slit his throat, they would do it without hesitation. And then when she was tried for murder, as even a queen could be in Shu Han, they would give testimony against her.

When they reached the queen's sanctuary, Makhi passed beneath a gilded arch and entered a small receiving room of pale green marble. She waved off the waiting servants and turned to the Tavgharad. "Do not disturb us," she instructed.

Yerwei followed her through the sitting room and on to the music room, until they reached the grand parlor where Makhi had once sat at her mother's knee, listening to stories of the first Taban queens—warriors who, accompanied by their retinue of tame falcons, had come down from the highest mountains in the Sikurzoi to rule the Shu. *Taban yenok-yun*, they were called. The storm that stayed.

The palace had been built by those queens, and it was still a marvel of engineering and beauty. It belonged to the Taban dynasty. It belonged to the people. And for this brief moment—just a few measured steps in the march of the Taban line—it belonged to Makhi. She felt her spirits lift as they entered the Court of the Golden Wing. It was a room of gilded light and flowing water, the slender, repeating arches of its terrace framing the groomed hedges and burbling fountains of the royal gardens below, and beyond them, the plum orchards of Ahmrat Jen, the trees standing like a regiment of soldiers in tidy rows. It was winter in Ravka, but here in the Shu Han, in this blessed land, the sun still shone warm.

Makhi walked out onto the terrace. This was one of the few places she felt safe talking, away from the prying eyes and curious ears of servants and spies. A green glass table had been set with pitchers of wine and water and a platter of late figs. In the garden below, she saw her niece Akeni playing with one of the gardener's boys. If Makhi didn't conceive daughters with one of her consorts, she had decided Akeni would one day inherit the crown. She wasn't the oldest of the Taban girls, but even at eight years old she was clearly the brightest. A surprise, given that her mother had the depth of a dinner plate.

"Aunt Makhi!" Akeni shouted from below. "We found a bird's nest!"

The gardener's boy did not speak or look directly at the queen, but stood silently beside his playmate, eyes on his battered sandals.

"You must not touch the eggs," Makhi called down to them. "Look but do not touch."

"I won't. Do you want flowers?"

"Bring me a yellow plum."

"But they're sour!"

"Bring one to me and I'll tell you a story." She watched as the children ran toward the southern wall of the garden. The fruit was high in the trees and would take time and ingenuity to reach.

"She is a good child," said Yerwei from the archway behind her. "Perhaps too biddable to make a good queen."

Makhi ignored him.

"Princess Ehri is alive," he said.

She grabbed the pitcher and hurled it down onto the paving stones below.

She tore the curtains from the windows and shredded them with her fingernails.

She buried her face in the silk pillows and screamed.

She did none of those things.

Instead she tossed the invitation onto the table and removed the heavy crown from her head. It was pure platinum, thick with emeralds, and always made her neck ache. She set it beside the figs and poured herself a glass of wine. Servants were meant to attend to these needs, but she didn't want them near her right now.

Yerwei slithered onto the balcony and helped himself to wine without asking. "Your sister is not supposed to be alive."

Princess Ehri Kir-Taban, most beloved of the people, most precious—for reasons Makhi had never been able to grasp. She wasn't

wise or beautiful or interesting. All she could do was simpler and play the *khatuur*. And yet she was adored.

Ehri was meant to be dead. What had gone wrong? Makhi had made her plans carefully. They should have ended with both King Nikolai and Princess Ehri dead—and Fjerda blamed for the assassinations. On the pretext of avenging her beloved sister's murder, she would march into a kingless, rudderless country, claim its Grisha for the *khergud* program, and use Ravka as a base for waging war with the Fjerdans.

She had chosen her agent well: Mayu Kir-Kaat was a member of Princess Ehri's own Tavgharad. She was young, a talented fighter and swordswoman, and most importantly, she was vulnerable. Her twin brother had vanished from his military unit and his family had been told that the young man had been killed in action. But Mayu had guessed the truth: He'd been selected to become one of the *khergud*, inducted into the Iron Heart program that would make him stronger and more lethal, and not entirely human. Mayu had begged that he be released before his conversion could take place and returned to service as an ordinary soldier.

Queen Makhi knew the process of becoming *khergud*—of having Grisha steel fused to one's bones or mechanical wings attached to one's back—was painful. But there was talk that the process did something else, that the soldiers brought into the program emerged changed in terrible ways, that the *khergud* lost some fundamental part of themselves through the conversion, as if the pain burned away a piece of what had made them human. And of course, Mayu Kir-Kaat didn't want that for her brother. They were twins, *kebben*. There was no closer bond. Mayu would take her own life and the life of a king to save him.

Queen Makhi set down her wine and poured herself a glass of

water instead. She needed a clear head for what was to come. Her nursemaid had once told her that she'd been meant to be a twin, that her brother had been brought into the world stillborn. "You ate his strength," she'd whispered, and even then, Makhi had known that she would one day be a queen. What might have happened had her brother been born? Who might Makhi have been?

It made no difference now.

Ravka's king was still very much alive.

And so was her sister.

This was bad. But Queen Makhi couldn't be sure of how bad. Did Nikolai Lantsov know of the plot against him? Had Mayu lost her nerve and told Princess Ehri of the true plan? No. It couldn't be. She refused to believe it. The bond of the *kebben* was too strong for that.

"This invitation feels like a trap," she said.

"Most marriages are."

"Spare me your wit, Yerwei. If King Nikolai knows—"

"What can the king prove?"

"Ehri might have much to say. Depending on what she knows."

"Your sister is a gentle soul. She would never believe you capable of such subterfuge, and she would certainly never speak against you."

Makhi swatted the invitation. "Then explain this!"

"Perhaps she fell in love. I hear the king is quite charming."

"Don't be absurd."

Princess Ehri had taken Mayu's place in the Tavgharad. Mayu had masqueraded as Princess Ehri. Mayu's task was to get close to King Nikolai, murder him, then take her own life. As far as Princess Ehri knew, that would be the end of it. But in the invasion that would ensue, lives would invariably be lost, and the Tavgharad had orders to make sure Ehri was one of the casualties. They had been assigned to Ehri's household, but they followed the queen's orders alone. Makhi's