

The
Songstress

Sample Chapters

RECORDS OF THE THREE REALMS

Book 1

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Chapter 1

Kari slammed into a nearby table. It toppled over with her, its half-empty cups and saucers shattering on the hardwood floor. She clenched her aching stomach where the guard had kicked her with his armored boot. Instinct demanded she stay still and motionless beneath the heavy table, and she obliged.

"Kari!" Suying struggled against the guards as they shoved her through the teahouse doors and out into the streets of Valceem.

Kari's chest heaved with each frantic breath. She stared wide eyed as the door slammed shut and her friend vanished from her sight. She grabbed the edge of the square wooden table as if to rend it off her, but she froze instead. Her warm breath beat against the skin of her fingers.

What was she doing? Any more resistance and the guards wouldn't deal her a simple kick to the gut but rather a sword to the heart. Or worse, she would join Suying in her fate and end up being a plaything for the emperors in their harem.

"Damn it!" Kari gritted her teeth.

If it had been anyone else, she wouldn't give it a second thought. Kari would turn a blind eye, and only be glad it wasn't her that was taken. But not Suying. Kari would not let them take her without a fight. At least, that was what she told her body, but it didn't comply with her wishes. She remained still, staring at the closed door across the teahouse.

Her grip on the table's edge loosened, despite her desire to move.

Kari closed her eyes in shame as the watchful glares of the teahouse's patrons descended upon her. They were waiting to see how the songstress would respond. Would she submit and allow her friend to be taken, or would she die to protect her? No one would blame Kari for submitting. She had already done more than most. She tried to pull Suying away from the guard's grasp, only to be swatted away. No one would judge her now.

But she would.

Kari took a deep breath, trying to chip away at the boulder of fear that crushed her heart.

It was strange. She remembered stories from her childhood where gallant heroes would find the courage within them to continue to fight. The way the stories were told, courage would wash over the heroes, fueling them with the strength and will to battle against all odds, but it was fear and indecision washing over her, preventing her from moving out from under the shelter of the table.

The cool floor and wooden table served as a comforting shield against the brutality of reality, and they beckoned her to accept the safety of their embrace.

The muffled cries of Suying permeated through the teahouse walls, filling Kari's ears and haunting her thoughts. For three years, they had been inseparable. Now, in a few moments, Suying would be gone forever.

"I have to move," Kari told herself, trying to force her arms to obey her command, but her body remained still and motionless. "I have to move. I have to move *now!* Or she's gone."

"Stay down, girl," the faceless voice pleaded. Or was it her own thoughts reverberating in her mind?

"Kari!"

Suying's last scream pierced through the wooden walls, penetrating Kari's heart. Her whole body cried out in response as passion overcame logic, and she forced her body into action. She tossed the table to the side, leapt to her feet, and darted passed the dumbstruck patrons, out of

the teahouse door, and into the city streets of the capital. The change from dim teahouse lighting to blinding sunlight strained her eyes as beams glistened off the green roofs of the cramped buildings.

“I won’t let you take her!”

Kari stood defiant, facing down the guardsmen who stared in bewilderment at the young girl before them. What was she doing? The words left her lips before her mind had time to process them.

“Stand aside, girl,” one guard ordered, stepping forward.

A quick scan of her surroundings revealed three carriages, each with two drivers, nine guardsmen, and a small crowd that had gathered to watch the commotion. The guards shoved Suying over to the middle carriage before tying her hands with rope. Two other girls with bound hands already sat in the carriage.

“I said you’re not taking her,” Kari repeated, less sure of her own resolve now than when she stood from under the table.

“Get back in the teahouse where you belong.” The guard sneered. “Or perhaps you’d like it if we burned this whole district to the ground.”

“You can’t do that,” someone from the crowd cried out.

“We’re Imperial guards. We can do what we want.”

“Just let them go. There’s nothing you can do. You’ll only make things worse for us,” an old man called to Kari.

Kari clenched her fists, turning her knuckles white. The looks of panic on the faces of those in the crowd mirrored her own. They were right. There was nothing she could do, but the situation had escalated beyond repair. Her fate had been sealed the moment she stood from the floor.

The empire didn’t attempt to hide its more colorful activities. Stories spread across the countryside of those who dared to question the emperors’ authority. Anyone who opposed the empire was executed, whole families murdered, buildings razed, and the bodies of the dead mutilated and left as a warning to others. The emperors demanded everyone in the empire bow their heads in respect to them, and any who questioned or even showed the slightest inclination toward disobedience were brutally dealt with.

Kari’s resistance would not be tolerated, regardless of what further actions she took. There was no turning back.

“You again?” The guard who had struck her in the teahouse shoved Suying toward one of his comrades, then stepped forward to confront Kari. “I’ve grown tired of this. Let’s kill her and be done with it.”

Three guards drew their swords, advancing on Kari. They wore lamellar armor of iron and leather riveted together and stained Imperial red. Even with a sword, which she didn’t have, fighting three armored opponents was not wise.

Could she do this? Kari had trained from an early age to survive—a necessary skillset for her people. However, the first rule of survival was to always run when given the choice, especially in hopeless situations. Now every fiber in her body told her to turn and flee, yet her eyes were fixated on Suying. Tears streamed down the young girl’s cheeks as she watched the guards advance toward Kari.

Kari had no weapon or plan, just an audience to witness her execution. She might die, but she wasn’t helpless. She focused her spirit energy into her hands, her fingers tingling in response.

Kari blocked out the cries from the crowd. She couldn’t afford any distractions. The slightest mistake would only expedite her death. Kari needed her full attention dedicated to the guards.

She wasn't a warrior, yet she would fight, and she would die for the opportunity to protect her friend. Kari's muscles tightened, and she braced herself as the guards approached striking distance.

"Stay your blade," a man ordered, stepping out of a nearby carriage.

His black hair accented his goatee and mustache, contrasting with his crimson daopao robe. The gold edges and collar of his robe indicated him to be of nobility. By the looks of it, he was in charge of the roundup.

"It would be a shame to see such a lovely young thing carved to pieces," he said, examining her.

"You have no right to do this." Kari cursed her shortsightedness. How much more absurd could she be? Was she really challenging the man holding back her death?

"I have every right." The man glared at Kari, looking down his nose as his lips curled into a frown. "If you are ignorant as to who I am, then I suggest you occasionally emerge from your filth and familiarize yourself with your betters. I am the high chancellor to the Imperial Tian. Everything under the sun belongs to the emperors. I have every legal authority to conscript in their name."

Was this really High Chancellor Cai Ren? Why would he be leading the effort to abduct women? Not that he had a reputation of being such an outstanding individual. Quite the contrary. But it seemed like an odd task for an official of his station.

It didn't matter who he was. She had come this far and pushed her luck, so she might as well see it to the end.

"This isn't right. She's only fourteen." Kari balled her fists, planting her feet. He may be holding the guards at bay, but she wouldn't let him intimidate her.

"We are gracious enough to grant you Imperial protection. It is only fitting some of you return the generosity by serving the empire and submitting to the will of the heavens. Unless you think your lovely songs bar you from service to the throne?"

Kari's brow furrowed, her eyes narrowing as she glared. He knew who she was – that she was the songstress of the Bamboo Garden. Had he been spying on her and Suying? What else did he know about them?

"Don't look so surprised. We have eyes all throughout the kingdom. You have quite the reputation for your lovely singing voice, and I hear your songs have made you immensely popular among the worms in the Bamboo Garden. I wonder if your talents would be of better use in service to the Imperial throne. If that doesn't suit you, then I suggest you return to your songs."

Kari's heart skipped a beat. Her options were as she suspected, and now they were placed in front of her. However, the high chancellor was still giving her an out, or so it seemed. She could turn back now and hope Cai Ren would keep his word and her head wouldn't end up decorating the end of a pike in the Imperial palace. Otherwise, she would face certain death or subjugation.

Kari hung her head low, her eyes shutting tight. What little courage she had found earlier faded. Her legs weakened under her weight, and her muscles relaxed as her resolve dissipated.

"So that's your answer." Cai Ren chuckled, motioning to the three guards to stand down.

"Help me," Suying whimpered. She struggled against the guard as he forced her into the carriage. Her face showed her age. Her expression was that of a terrified child waking up from a nightmare – a nightmare that was just beginning.

This was no fate for a child. Kari wasn't much older, only seventeen, but she wasn't going to allow them to take Suying.

"Take me in her place!"

What had she said? The words erupted from Kari's mouth as if independent from her mind.

"What?" A wicked smile broke across Cai Ren's face.

"Take me in her place." Kari regretted the words, but swallowed her fear, burying it beneath her resolve. "I'm older and better endowed, and, as you know, I can sing and dance. I would be far better suited than Suying for the harem and to entertain the emperors."

Cai Ren stared at her, sizing her up. "Are you volunteering on your own accord?"

Kari hesitated. By the goddess, was she really going to do this? Join the harem? Volunteer for this nightmare?

Suying's eyes were wide, and she shook her head as if to say, "Not for me." Kari sighed. Unlike Suying, she would at least be better suited to escape.

"I am." Kari clenched her jaw.

"You heard that!" Cai Ren announced, addressing the crowd. "The songstress pledges herself to the service of the Imperial throne on her own accord. Let no man say otherwise."

Kari winced as a guard seized her arm, his fingers digging into her flesh.

"What about the girl? Should we release her?" a guard asked.

"No, take them both."

"What? We had a deal!" Kari lunged at Cai Ren, but the guard's grip halted her assault. She struggled to free herself from his grasp as she was pulled toward Cai Ren.

"I made no such deal." He waved her concern away with a flick of his sleeve. "I agreed to accept you as an attendant, not to release her. If you wish to dispute the arrangement of our agreement, I would be more than happy to plead your case to the court. Would that satisfy you?"

Kari slouched, staring at the ground. As high chancellor, Cai Ren was effectively the highest-ranking judge in the empire, second in power only to the emperors. It was all a farce, and the bastard knew it. There was nothing Kari could do.

"No."

"Very well. Then it will behoove you to submit to our arrangement. Bind her hands," he ordered.

A guard tied Kari's hands together, the tight ropes cutting into her wrists. She wanted to unleash her full fury on Cai Ren, but even if she could, death would quickly follow any further outbursts. She was powerless. Kari stared at Suying, who had begun to cry.

At least they would share in the nightmare together.

Chapter 2

With their hands bound, the guards pushed Kari and Suying into the carriage next to the two other girls. Kari glared at Cai Ren, who climbed into the carriage and sat on the bench across from them. He met her glare with a smirk as a guard sat beside him.

Kari had never wanted to kill another human being before, but this unshakable urge to take the guard's sword and drive it into Cai Ren's smug face fell upon her like a torrential downpour of hatred. His arrogant grin cemented her rage as he wallowed in his smarmy superiority. He must have felt so proud of himself, throwing the weight of his position around to get his way.

"Cheer up, girls," Cai Ren said, still smiling, "Soon, you will be engulfed in the pleasures of royal affairs. For you to enjoy these luxuries, all you have to do is submit to royal desires with a smile on your face and a song in your heart."

A comment aimed at her, she was sure. If her hands weren't bound, she would kill him. She hated feeling this much anger toward another person. It gave him power over her. She hated him even more for that.

"I want to go home," Suying whispered.

Kari closed her eyes, nodding in agreement. She shared her sentiments, but, for now, they were trapped in Cai Ren's game, forced to play a subservient role until the opportune moment presented itself for them to escape.

Kari fought back the creeping grin that was spreading across her face. Escape would be her revenge. She would humiliate him. Make him regret deceiving her. She just hoped Suying would understand their need for patience and not despair in the meantime.

They rode in silence as the carriage made its way through the winding streets of Valceem as they headed to Koryon, the Imperial palace. Palace was such a generous term for it. Koryon was essentially a city within the city. Two grand walls surrounded the palace to separate it from the rest of the world.

The large wooden gates of the smaller outer wall opened outward as the convoy of carriages approached the Gate of Divine Majesty. The outer wall was only about fifty feet high, relatively small for a city known for its massive walls.

The outer gates slammed shut behind them as they crossed over the Transcendent Bridge and onto the other side of the Cerulean River, a manmade branch of the Valceem River that ran between the inner and outer walls separating the common world from the *Imperial dream*. A lump formed in Kari's throat. They were beyond the point of no return. This was really happening.

Straight in front of them was the inner wall and the Grand Entrance. The inner wall was a staggering hundred feet high, towering over the nearby city buildings. The wall weaved its way through Koryon, dividing the palace into its seven districts.

The carriages didn't wait for the gate to open. Instead, they turned to the west, past the military garrison, through the various houses and buildings. Lining the outer wall was a garrison of guards and the residences of various nobles and court ministers. Soldiers chattered about the new shipment of girls from outside the carriage.

The carriage stopped in front of a storehouse and the guards leapt into action, seizing the girls and pulling them out of the carriage. They untied their bindings before shoving them into the building. The storehouse was filled with merchants and smiths selling specialty armor and arms.

It seemed an odd choice on where to take four potential concubines, unless of course they were planning to arm their captives, which seemed highly unlikely. Unscrupulous-looking men, all donning the crimson sash that signified them as Imperial soldiers, browsed the various wares and stalls. Anyone wearing that sash was someone to be cautious around, but better crimson than blue.

Cai Ren led the group through the store, eventually stopping at a desk in front of a large vault door. A woman with jet-black hair in a bun sat at the desk. She looked up from the book she was writing in, her dark eyes somber. Two heavily armored men with daos – single-edged swords – sat at a nearby table playing Aether.

“New additions?” the woman asked.

“Oh yes, and they are quite spirited,” Cai Ren said, his obnoxious smirk returning. “Wash them up and get them ready with the rest. The emperors will be by at the start of next week for their auditions. Make sure these girls are properly trained on etiquette and obedience. And do keep an eye on the green-eyed one. She could be a handful if not broken soon, but do try to avoid damaging her voice. That’s her greatest attribute.”

Her greatest attribute? What a bastard. He described her like a prized horse he was getting ready for show.

“But of course,” the woman agreed. She stood from the desk, then turned her attention to the group of girls. Her purple silk shenyi dress flowed with each of her movements. “My name is Zhenhua. I am the head matron of this house, and I will be your advisor. It is my job to ensure your transition from commoner to attendant is as smooth as possible. Now, what are your names?”

“My name is Tanaka Kyoko.” The girl with the long braids stared at the ground. Her hairstyle was typical of young girls, and not dissimilar from the way Suying wore hers, but given Kyoko’s age and the impracticality of the style for work, she had to be the daughter of a noble. Her hair looked unkempt. Clearly, she wasn’t looking for a suitor. Unfortunately, that choice was being taken from her. Kyoko wore a simple ruqun with a white blouse and a red skirt tied at her waist.

“I am Hayashibara Momiji,” the girl wearing the all-white ruqun said. She wore a cream-colored banbi coat over the blouse, which exposed her forearms. Her light-brown hair was held in twin twists on each side of her head, indicating working-class status.

Kari preferred to keep her own brown hair in a single loose ponytail so the front was loose and framed her face. While it was atypical of songstresses and dancers, who typically favored more ornate styles, Kari found it much easier to manage.

Kari remained silent out of defiance. She had no expectations of enjoying her stay in the storehouse, and she sure as hell wasn’t going to make this a pleasant experience on her captors either.

Whether out of fear or rebellion, Suying kept quiet as well.

“And you two?” Zhenhua asked, tapping her foot on the stone floor.

“So, you’re supposed to help us?” Suying asked, not bothering to look up. “What if we don’t want to be here? How are you going to help me?”

Cai Ren laughed. “Good luck with this bunch.” He motioned for his guards to follow as he left Zhenhua to deal with her new wards.

“You insolent little child. Unless you wish to feel the wrath of the Tian, you will soon learn some respect.” Zhenhua motioned to one guard, who grumbled at having to leave his game. Kari gritted her teeth. Zhenhua was summoning a guard? What for? It seemed the slightest infraction would escalate quickly behind the palace walls.

"That won't be necessary. I'll ensure she falls in line," Kari interjected, placing her hand on Suying's shoulder. "But she does have a point. She is just a child, as you rightly pointed out, and would be of more use to the empire after maturing for a few more years."

Zhenhua motioned the guard away with a wave of her hand. "The wisdom of the emperors will determine of what use she will be. Better to mature under the watchful care of a patriarch than left to die on the street or by the sword."

Kari closed her eyes as she fought to hide her disdain. "Agreed." Her eyes met Suying's quivering stare. She would have to apologize to her later.

"So, are you her keeper?" Zhenhua sneered and turned her nose up, looking down at them.

"As a matter of fact, I am," Kari said. "Her name is Lin Suying, and I am Kari."

Zhenhua's eyes narrowed, darting back and forth between the pair. "Fine. Keep her in line. The next time she shows disrespect for me or a member of my house, she'll reap the consequences." Zhenhua recorded their names into her book, then squinted at Kari. "What sort of name is Kari? Are you a foreigner?"

"No, I am Xianese," Kari lied. She couldn't risk them knowing the truth of her heritage. She hated using it, but perhaps it was better to use her actual name for a change, at least in the presence of the empire. "My name is Hikari, but I am called Kari."

"And your family name?" Zhenhua glared at her.

"I have none," Kari replied.

"Pitiful to come from such a low class. You may follow me to your betterment." Zhenhua scribbled down the information before opening the impressive vault door. It wasn't something Kari could pick, not that she was any good at picking locks to begin with. It required both a key and a combination. Kari tried to peek at the combination, but Zhenhua shielded the dial with her hand.

The door swung open to an expansive, dimly lit room lined with small beds on raised platforms. It was nearly filled to capacity with women. There were no windows, and the only light sources were the lanterns that hung from the center of the ceiling and ran the length of the room. Smaller lanterns were affixed to the walls in between. The flickers of light cast ominous shadows on the stone walls.

The beds in the room were so close together there was barely any walking space on either side. A small wooden chest was set at the foot of each. A desk was positioned in the center of the room where two more guards in red lamellar armor kept watch. Another door, which probably led to more sleeping quarters, was opposite from the entrance.

The room was cold and barren of decoration, hardly what she expected of quarters designed to house attendants. The walls and floor were all stone instead of wood, an odd sight in Xiang. The room resembled that of a dilapidated military barracks or a prison more so than an Imperial house.

The other women stared, loudly gossiping as Zhenhua led the four newcomers farther into the room. Kari counted fifty beds in the main chamber, with nearly as many women in here, and no telling how many more in the back quarters.

"These will be yours." Zhenhua motioned to four empty beds. "Now, listen carefully, for I will not repeat myself. Do not talk to the guards unless talked to first. Do not go into the back room unless you are being escorted by me, one of my assistants, or a guard. You will take a bath at least twice a day, and you will be suspect to regular inspections and grooming. Come, my assistant is waiting."

Zhenhua led the group into the back, which wasn't much different from the main room, just a lot smaller. Instead of single beds, it had pairs of bunk beds lining the walls. The girls glared as their party passed through, but remained silent. Was it scorn or pity in their eyes?

They made their way through the back room, then passed another guard station as they entered through a door that led into a rear hallway. The doors lining the hallway definitely weren't impenetrable on this end, but she had no way of knowing if any of the branching doors led to an exit.

Zhenhua took them into one of the many rooms. Another woman, dressed in a flowing pink silk shenyi, sat at a desk at the front of the room.

"You are to take one of the chairs from the wall and sit in front of Matron Tama." Zhenhua motioned to a cluster of odd pole-like chairs in a pile in the corner. Each chair comprised of a skinny pole with a rounded bottom and a red cushion attached to the top.

"We're supposed to sit on those? How?" Kyoko asked.

"You must balance. Sit down and fold your legs. Your feet should not touch the floor. A real lady shouldn't have any problem balancing while maintaining her posture. This will prepare you for your future duties as an attendant."

Kari sneered at Zhenhua. How was balancing on top of a pole supposed to help them? It was merely a cruel charade meant to break their wills and humiliate them.

Kari took a deep breath. She would not let Zhenhua enjoy her subjugation. She grabbed a chair and slammed it down in front of the desk, the force of the impact echoing against the stone walls. Kari sat on the cushion with her feet grounded to the floor to stabilize herself. Each movement needed to be slow and deliberate. She lifted one leg and then the other, crossing them on top of the chair. It wobbled at first, but she assumed a meditative position, controlling her breathing and the tiny movements of her muscles, which allowed her to steady the pole and keep it upright.

Zhenhua glared at Kari, who had to fight back the urge to snicker. Zhenhua scowled, clearly annoyed Kari had mastered the motion and on her first try, too.

"Like this," Kari said to Suying as she focused on maintaining her posture. "The trick is to find your center of balance before you attempt to lift your feet. Once you've done that, focus on maintaining a steady breath. As you sway from side to side, you'll need to adjust your weight accordingly."

Suying and the other two girls followed suit. After several failed attempts, Momiji was the first to successfully sit in her chair. It wobbled under her, but she maintained her balance. After falling off a dozen times, Suying was finally able to sit on the chair. Her body wiggled from side to side as she struggled to stay on top.

Kyoko, however, could not seem to find her balance. She kept falling off. The chair would wobble and top over. With each failed attempt, her legs shook more, her breathing becoming more frantic. At this rate, she had no hope of completing the task.

"Foolish girl," Zhenhua scolded. "Are you no lady? Your peers have successfully completed the task. Why can't you?"

Kari dropped from her pole chair, which caused it to crash to the floor, and rushed over to Kyoko.

"What are you doing?" Zhenhua stomped her feet.

"She needs help." Kari shot Zhenhua a scowl as she put her arms around Kyoko and helped the girl to her feet. "She's never going to get it with you belittling her like this."

"Your insolence will be beaten out of you!"

Kari rolled her eyes. Her actions were bound to have consequences, but after the day she was having, she'd quickly lost the ability to care.

"Take deep breaths. We'll get through this," Kari whispered to Kyoko.

Once Kari had Kyoko stabilized on the chair, at least to where she didn't look like she was just going to topple off, Kari returned to her own.

"No, for your actions, you must stand," Zhenhua demanded.

Kari shrugged her shoulders, insolently standing where she was.

"You will stand on the chair," Zhenhua added, pointing to the discarded pole.

"What?" Kari clenched her jaw, glaring at the matron.

"You heard my order. In fact, you will stand on the chair, balancing on one leg. The rest of you can get off and sit on the floor. If Kari fails to stand or falls, you will *all* be whipped and beaten."

Suying and the other girls turned wide eyes on Kari as they descended from their seats. Kari's nostrils flared. She wasn't about to give the matron the satisfaction of winning. Kari grabbed the pole, then set it upright. She needed to be quick or the pole would fall before she could get on top of it. She let go of the pole, leapt up, and landed on the red cushion with one leg. The other, she raised high into the air. The chair swayed from side to side, threatening to buck her off, but she readjusted her weight and stabilized herself.

"Know your place!" Zhenhua kicked the pole out from under Kari.

Her hands shot up to shield her face from the impact of the stone floor. She struck the ground with a thud as rage flared inside her. She wanted nothing more than to pop up to her feet and lay into Zhenhua, but logic seemed to dictate she should conceal her anger. Releasing her rancor would only exacerbate the situation.

Kari grunted as Zhenhua pressed her foot against the back of Kari's head, smashing her face into the floor. "You will stay here and be quiet until you are told otherwise, or else I will consider your life forfeit. If you do not care for your own life, then I will take hers."

She couldn't see who Zhenhua was talking about, but she knew it was Suying. Kari had overdone it. Her showboating and rebellious attitude were drawing too much attention to her. Anymore outbursts would be the end for her or Suying.

Kari zoned out as Zhenhua explained what was expected of the girls. She didn't care about their patriotic duties to the throne or the emperors. She just wanted to take Suying and go home.

"I am the head matron of this house," Zhenhua explained. "This is Matron Tama. She will oversee your hygiene and physical appearance. Together, we will ensure you meet the emperors' standards for cleanliness and beauty. We'll start with the basics. Quickly and concisely, tell me where you are from. Momiji, you will start."

"I grew up in Valceem's southern borough, Verzaku," Momiji said. "My family owns a rice farm there."

"Verzaku is a poor borough. Even a great city like Valceem has its uncivilized slums. At least you are here now. The decree of heaven has mandated you be elevated from a lowly peasant to that of a noble attendant serving the Sons of Heaven." Zhenhua wrote Momiji's details down in her book before turning her attention to Kyoko. "You... where are you from?"

"School." Kyoko's voice quivered, her eyes watering as she spoke. She must come from a wealthy family if they could still afford to send her to school. Most of the schools were shut down after the School of Enlightenment closed, and since the Imperial brothers took over, a lot of the students who remained in open schools were forced to find work. "Yesterday, a government official visited us. We lined up to greet him. He said I was his favorite, and he gave me a pendant

to wear. Today, the guards showed up and asked for the girl with the royal insignia. The teacher pulled me out of class, then handed me over to the guards who brought me here.”

“I don’t care. Where are you from? Where is your school located?” Zhenhua crossed her arms, impatiently tapping her foot as she waited for a response.

“Da’lavoth,” Kyoko whimpered. Kari was right—the girl did come from a wealthy family if she lived there.

“Stop crying. There is no need to be sad,” Zhenhua demanded. “Anything worth knowing, you will learn here. As for your friends and family, they have already been informed of your service to the empire. They are rejoicing as we speak.”

Kyoko’s eyes swelled, tears pouring down her face. She cried in silence, not making a single sound. Was Zhenhua trying to be cruel or was she that daft to the feelings of others?

“Enough of this. You two, where are you from?” Zhenhua ignored the crying Kyoko, directing her attention to Kari and Suying.

“I’m from the district of Xiao’lavoth,” Suying answered without hesitation. The coldness Zhenhua had shown Kyoko was already weakening her resolve. She was stronger than this. Kari just had to find a way to remind her. “Bandits raided my home and killed my family when I was eleven. I was on my own until I met Kari.”

“No wonder you’re so impudent.” Zhenhua stared down her nose at her. “Any child growing up without a father figure to guide you through life is bound to turn out a deviant. Of course, only a coward would allow himself to be killed in such a shameful manner. At least you can redeem your family by loyally serving the throne now.

“And what of you?” Zhenhua asked, turning her attention toward Kari.

“I’m an orphan, too,” Kari lied. If they knew who she really was, they would execute her without question. The Guardian of the Three Realms had criminalized the very existence of her people. “From Xiao’lavoth. My family was killed by raiders.”

Zhenhua accepted Kari’s story. It was rather typical after all, and not too dissimilar from Suying’s. The guards of Valceem were more preoccupied with serving the emperors’ backside than protecting the people of the city.

Once their backgrounds were recorded, Tama ordered the girls to undress down to their undergarments while she took their measurements. Tama called out each measurement for Zhenhua to record, all the while Zhenhua mumbled about various silks and colors that would accent each girl’s look.

Tama was considerably younger than Zhenhua. She had her black hair tied in a bun with a red ribbon holding it in place. There was also a slight sadness to her face. When they were finished being measured, Tama led the girls to the bath and provided each girl with scented soaps and bath salts. Ten individual baths filled the room, each with folding wall panels that could be set up for privacy.

The bath was a pleasant change of pace. It had been years since Kari had taken a heated bath. The warm water felt amazing against her skin. Closing her eyes, she had to fight the urge to fall asleep.

Once they were finished bathing, Zhenhua returned with robes for each girl. They were rather plain, white with blue embroidery. Zhenhua explained they would have a whole new set of clothes, made from their measurements, if they were selected to join the palace harem. Tama remained silent as she helped them get dressed and brushed their hair. She had barely spoken a word to the girls since their meeting. Each had their hair brushed thoroughly before being tied into ponytails.

Tama led the group back to the sleeping quarters. "I will go prepare the artist for your official portraits. In the meantime, relax and get to know your fellow selected ladies."

Each of the four newcomers claimed a bed. Kari scoffed as she picked up the ceramic pillow from the head. She hated the pillows of Xiang. They were hard and cold, nothing like back home.

Kari slid the pillow underneath the bed. Collapsing on top of the sleeping mat, she draped her arms over her face. Damn this place. They were being treated like pets to be groomed and paraded around for the emperors. It was dehumanizing, worse than being treated like a prisoner. Anger, fear, passion, and whatever emotions she had experienced before faded away, leaving only a poignant dullness in their place.

"What do we do now?" Suying sat on the bed next to Kari's.

"I don't know." Kari sat up, taking in Suying's tear-stained face. There wasn't much they could do in their current situation but bide their time and find a way to escape.

"The best thing we can do is to simply go along with it," Momiji said. Kari cut her eyes to her. She didn't like anyone eavesdropping into her conversation, but with the close quarters, privacy would be scarce. "From what I hear, this life isn't all bad."

"How can you say that?" Kyoko asked. Kari clutched her thighs as Kyoko plopped down next to her. "My friends, they'll never know what happened to me. Or... what if they find out? What will they think?"

"But Kari, you have..." Suying started, but Kari held out a hand to stop her. She didn't want anyone to know about her magic. She couldn't risk the guards finding out about her abilities. If she were seen as a threat, there was no telling how they would react. Until she had a plan, she needed to be careful and hide, not just her powers, but also what she really was.

One slip up could be a death sentence.

Kari flopped onto her bed again while the other three girls crowded around, talking incessantly about home. Home had become just a strange word to Kari. It had been four years since she left hers, and she wanted nothing more than to return. She missed her mother and her friends, and she often dreamed about returning to the small island, but that was impossible. She was dead to that life. An exile from her own home, never able to return. But Kari missed the waves on the shore. And the weather. Unlike Xiang, where the weather changed, home was constant, not too warm and not too cold.

Kari shot to her feet as two guards approached their beds. The guards sniggered, eyeing all four girls up and down.

"What do you think?" one guard asked, stroking his chin as he circled the group of newcomers.

"This one is too skinny, not enough meat on her bones for my tastes," the other responded, referring to Momiji. "What about you?"

"I like the young one," he said, grabbing hold of Suying's arm.

Kari pulled Suying behind her, planting herself in front of the other girls. Whatever they were planning, Kari had spent too much of today sitting by and watching. No more.

Gritting her teeth, she pursed her lips together. No, she needed to restrain herself. She couldn't let her anger get the better of her or allow an erratic word to escape her lips. After what happened in the back room, she needed to keep a low profile and avoid making too much of a scene. At least with her hands unbound, she could defend herself if need be, but she didn't want to force a confrontation if she could help it. At least not yet.

"Are you that daft you can't see how gorgeous this one is?" Laughing, the guard motioned at Kari. She scowled in return. "Have you ever seen a woman look at you with eyes like that? And that color. I've never seen eyes that green before."

“You should be more hospitable.” The second guard grabbed Kari’s chin, then squeezed. She had to restrain from biting his hand. Kari jerked out of his grip, shooting daggers with her eyes.

“With an attitude like that, perhaps I should teach you some respect.”

“So, which one do you want? The little one’s mine.” The guard shoved Kari aside as he seized Suying’s shoulders, smirking.

Kari clenched her fists, focusing her energy into her hands. So much for avoiding a confrontation.

Chapter 3

“I’ll take this one.” The guard grabbed Kyoko’s arm, snatching her toward him. “Just look at her, so soft and submissive. She’ll be their first pick for sure.”

“She does have a lot of features the emperors like, but I have ten bits that says this one is chosen first.” The guard shoved Suying away.

“Yeah, I can see that. Especially Jiaorong – he likes the young ones.” The first guard released Kyoko, eying the girls up and down as he licked his lips. “I’ll take that bet. Of course, if it’s Jiaorong, I’m sure he’ll take ‘em all.”

They were only betting on them? Kari breathed a sigh of relief as she relaxed her energy.

“Don’t you two have something better to do?” Kari asked, annoyance dripping from her lips like venom. The plight of the girls was nothing more than a game to them. These guards didn’t see people – they only saw playthings, toys for others to use, and from the sound of it, the emperors were worse. What did he mean by his comment that Jiaorong liked the young ones? This was fundamentally sick.

“You’ll shut your mouth, girl, if you know what’s good for you.” The guard raised the back of his hand toward her.

Kari slumped down on her bed. It was useless. She wasn’t a person to him, and there was no doubt he would act on his threat at the slightest inclination. People rarely liked to hurt others, but when they saw someone as subhuman, there was no telling what horrors they might inflict. Shagin, her people, knew all too well the atrocities humanity could wreak on itself when one group looked down upon another. She had no choice but to swallow her pride until she and Suying could escape from this nightmare.

With their bets placed, the guards left the girls alone. Kari fell backward, allowing her head to come crashing onto her bed. “Damn this place,” she muttered under her breath.

“Don’t let it get to you,” a young woman with jet-black hair said, approaching the group. “They always place bets on who they think will be picked first from a new group. I’m Ina, by the way.”

Kari and the other three girls took turns introducing themselves. Ina seemed rather pleased to meet them. She offered each a warm smile and a bow. Bowing was a foreign concept to Kari. The Xianese were the first people she had met who bowed for a greeting. It was a custom that took getting used to.

“Allow me to be the first to properly welcome you to the showroom. We sincerely hope you enjoy your stay in hell,” Ina said with a flick of her sleeve. Kari smiled. Finally, someone who got it.

“Is this where all the attendants live?” Suying asked.

“No, only the ones awaiting placement into a permanent house.” Ina sat next to Suying on her bed. “Occasionally, the emperors come by to choose from the girls within the main room. But, if you haven’t been chosen after three months, you will be moved to the back

room. Any noble is allowed to select from the girls in that group. Granted, they have to pay a dowry."

Kari's heart sank in her chest. Somehow, the thought of being bought seemed worse. There was no denying she'd truly be a slave then. *What must it be like to wait for some rich noble to buy you like a sword in a store?* She shook off the thought of girls lined in stalls as men browsed through and haggled over them like cheap wares.

The emperors had thousands of concubines. What kind of nagging thoughts must plague those not chosen when the emperors could take as many attendants as they wanted? It explained the glares the newcomers had received when they passed through. Even if a girl didn't want to be picked, there must be some small voice lingering in their minds wondering why they weren't good enough.

"At least they're closer to getting out," Ina said, noticing Kari staring at the back doors. "If you are sent to the back, you will only be there for three months at most. If no one buys you, you're released."

"Really? We can be set free?" Kyoko's eyes lit up.

"Do they just open the front door and let you walk out?" Kari asked in disbelief. It seemed too good to be true.

"Sort of..." Ina averted her gaze, fiddling with the silver necklace dangling around her neck. "But sometimes, that can be worse. Many of the girls here come from cities scattered throughout the empire. With no money, family, or friends, and nothing but the clothes they wore when they were taken, a lot of those released end up turning to brothels or falling into servitude in order to save up enough money to pay for return passage to their homes."

"That's awful," Suying added. Within Xiang, it was a sad fact of life that a woman without financial support from her family would struggle just to survive. The laws of the empire forbade women from working most jobs. Kari had gotten lucky to find a teahouse willing to hire her to perform and serve, but the pay was hardly enough to live on, especially for her and Suying.

"You know a lot about this place. You must have been here a while," Kari said, but Ina ignored her.

Smiling, Ina reached out to Kyoko and brushed her hair behind her ear. "You are very pretty. I heard Tama said they were getting ready to do your portraits."

"That's right," Kari said. Why would Ina change the subject like that?

"Those portraits are the equivalent of life and death. Once you become an attendant, the emperors use those portraits to pick out which girl will join him for the night. A good portrait will help you win favor with your emperor, but the artist usually demands some sort of bribe. If you don't have money, a pledge to pay him once you become an attendant is sufficient. I highly suggest you all take this offer if you want to live a comfortable life in the palace."

"Why would we want to do that?" Kyoko's brow furrowed. She had a point. They could improve their odds of not being selected to sleep with the emperors with a poor portrait.

“Right now, I know you don’t want to be here, but it will get better one day. However, the only way it will is with the emperors’ favor. The bribe is customary. Each girl here has to know her lot, and they must resign themselves to their fate early on because the comfort of their captivity depends on their representation to the emperors. The better your representation, the more often you will be visited by the emperors and the more favor you will earn. The more favor you earn, the more you are rewarded with money and freedom. Some girls even have their own homes within the palace, whereas they might not have one to return to.” Ina unclenched her fingers from the necklace to place her hands to her hips. Kari didn’t even have her own home outside of the palace walls, but she didn’t want one inside them either. She had no intention of being trapped long enough to warrant making her stay more comfortable.

“How many girls are sent to the back?” If Kari was going to escape, she needed to know as much as possible about the storehouse. In her opinion, her new font of information had more knowledge for her to glean.

“Every month, they try to add twenty girls to the stock to replace the ones who become attendants. Out of each group of twenty, maybe four or five aren’t picked,” Ina said.

That didn’t leave a lot of hope of things simply getting better. If Kari’s situation was going to improve, it had to be done through her own fruition.

“How many girls are eventually released?” Suying asked. Was she picking up on Kari’s train of thought or was she simply curious?

“That depends,” Ina said, staring at the stone ceiling. “The dowry is one-thousand crowns per attendant, so usually only the wealthier nobles can afford one.”

“A thousand crowns?” Momiji’s eyebrows arched. “You could buy a mansion for that much.”

“Sometimes, a commoner or soldier will save up their wages—or even sell their property—just to afford one. Unfortunately, they’re not too strict about their policy of only nobles being allowed to purchase girls. And believe me, you don’t want to be bought by someone with no property. That’s a fate worse than death.” Ina stood from the bed, then motioned for them to follow her. “Come on, I’ll introduce you around.”

With a wave of her hand, Kari declined. While she wanted to keep interrogating Ina, she needed to think through what she knew if she was going to escape. Besides, getting to know anyone else on a personal level would just make it harder to leave them behind.

Suying declined the invitation as well. Instead, she moved beside Kari while Ina led Momiji and Kyoko to meet some other girls.

“Did you hear that?” Suying asked, the innocence in her voice returning. “We just need to wait six months... then we can walk out free. All we have to do is to make ourselves less appealing. Don’t bathe, cover ourselves in dirt, whatever it takes.”

“I don’t think that will work.” Kari pursed her lips. “You heard Zhenhua explain the rules. It’s just a hunch, but I don’t think they would take too kindly to us sabotaging *their* property.”

“So, what are we supposed to do then?”

“We have seven days before the emperors come. Based on what those two guards were saying, the emperor likes young girls. They seem to think you have a good chance of

being picked quickly.” The thought of the emperors liking children was troubling, and Kari convulsed at the thought of anyone younger than Suying being put through this ordeal. Kari shook her head, trying to dislodge the thought. “At any rate, I suggest we’re not here when they arrive.”

“How do we do that?”

“I’m getting ready to think of something.” Kari winked. Suying’s face lightened up as she smiled for the first time since early this morning.

Suying left to join the other girls, leaving Kari alone with her thoughts.

Kari scanned the room. Escaping wouldn’t be easy. Two guards were stationed in the room with them. Not to mention the impenetrable vault door. It was too sturdy to break through, so any other option would require her to obtain the key or pick the lock, plus finding some way to get past the combination. Unfortunately, she missed the classes on lock picking in school. Sure, she could pick simple locks, but she struggled with standard door locks, and this was anything but standard.

Why did Suying have to be here? The weight of reality came crashing down on Kari’s shoulders. Escaping with Suying would be far more difficult than finding a way out on her own. She would be a hindrance to her, no matter what plan Kari took.

She walked to the chest at the end of her bed, then rummaged through its contents. It was filled with makeup, soaps, lotions, and perfumes. Kari rolled her eyes. Of course it wasn’t going to have anything useful in it.

Without a weapon or any viable escape route, there was little hope she would be able to plan an effective escape. As it stood, she might as well just be contemplating her navel.

“Kyoko, Momiji, Hikari, and Suying,” Tama called from the doorway. “Follow me.”

Grumbling, Kari stood from her bed and headed toward Tama with the other girls. Suying shot a worried glance at Kari. She smiled, trying to reassure her. There was nothing to be worried about yet.

“Good luck,” Ina said as they gathered around Tama.

“I will take you to get your portraits done,” Tama said, motioning for them to follow. She led them to the back where they were each placed in separate rooms before different artists.

The artist said nothing as Kari sat in front of him. He stared at her, jotting down notes and sketching a quick outline of her face on a piece of parchment. The room wasn’t much bigger than a large closet, just enough space for her, the artist, and a small table topped with brushes, pigments, and parchments.

Kari gazed out of the large window behind the artist. The green grass of a beautiful courtyard beckoned. She would love to wiggle her toes in the grass, to feel the dirt and soil against her skin. She had only been here for a few hours, and she already missed the earth outside.

The artist ignored her longing eyes as he went about his work. He mumbled incoherently while he prepared his brushes and pigments.

“Aren’t you a sight? Very lovely. Very lovely indeed. However, if you really want to grab the attention of the emperor, you’ll need my help. Natural beauty can only carry

you so far. However, I can make you a goddess. You'll be immortalized by my brush." The artist held out his hand, but Kari had no intention of paying the bribe.

After a few moments of silent glares, the artist dropped his hand and scowled. "I hold your future in a single brush stroke. A beautiful portrait will bring you riches while a poor one might leave you dissolute. Think on that for a moment, then realize a little incentive on my part to enhance your beauty might grant you a better future. If you cannot pay now, I will accept a pledge for a future payment."

"If you are after a bribe, then call it what it is. However, I have no intention of paying such a thing." Kari turned up her nose at the idea.

"You insolent little brat. Did you not hear what I said? I control your destiny." He slammed his brush onto the wooden table. The thud reverberated in the tiny room.

Kari's eyes narrowed. She would not let him intimidate her. "I am the maker of my own destiny. You simply seek to gain from the misfortunes and fears of others."

"As you wish."

Cursing her under his breath, he went back to work. He tossed the parchment from the table, then grabbed a piece of silk and began painting her official portrait. Kari became mesmerized by his meticulous brush work. He started with her outline, then layered colors one by one, switching between brushes to get the best strokes possible.

When he finished, he showed the final product to Kari.

"That looks nothing like me," she protested.

It wasn't a bad portrait by any means, but it wasn't remarkable either. All in all, it was a poor representation of her. Her hair was messy and unkempt; her eyes a dull blue, a far cry from their bright emerald green; her bone structure was different, more foreign; and he'd added a black mole underneath her right eye.

"Then perhaps you should have paid for a better portrait."

Disbelieving his audacity, Kari shook her head. Why was she getting so worked up over the painting? It wasn't like she had any intention of staying here. With any luck, she would be gone before the emperors even came for their inspection.

She forwent the gracious bow. Instead, stood and left the artist alone with his colors.

Tama escorted the four girls into the main room where trays of food waited. The food wasn't at all what Kari expected. She had anticipated high-quality food since they were now in service to the throne, but they were only served plain hot noodles with a single burnt piece of fish each. The poor food seemed to fit their desolate accommodations. Kari scarfed the noodles down as fast as she could. She was much hungrier than she realized, but even through her hunger pangs, she couldn't stomach eating the fish. It was far beyond simply blackened – it was inedible.

Once they finished eating, Tama escorted them to the baths to wash up. Kari didn't mind the mandatory baths. However, the inspection afterward was a bit humiliating. But at least it got her back into the warm water, and it was quite relaxing for a few minutes.

As Kari crashed into her bed, she stared at the ceiling. Cracks ran the course of the stone. Just how thick was it? Truthfully, it didn't matter. It was impossible for her to break through the walls. Even if she did, the noise would alert the guards and they would

descend upon her. Stealth would be her key, which made Suying's presence even more unfortunate.

Kari's mind raced with various ideas and fantasies on how she would finally escape. Each seemed more impossible than the last. It wasn't long before her fatigue from the day caught up to her, and she drifted off to sleep.

Zhenhua woke the girls up before the sun had even risen. The guards led the girls through the back into the large courtyard, where they were made to stretch and run laps. The emperors had specific height and weight requirements, and they were eager to ensure each selected lady developed a regular exercise routine to maintain their figure.

Kari had to intentionally hold back to avoid outrunning everyone. She matched her pace to Suying's, even attempting to mimic her raspy breathing. The years of training Kari underwent were finally paying off.

Kari didn't want to stand out from the group too much. One of the first lessons Shagin taught was the ability to blend in with a crowd. Blending in, being ordinary, and being unremarkable was a powerful tool, especially when one needed to be invisible, and that was exactly what she needed to do. The less memorable she was, the longer it would take for them to notice she was missing when she finally made her move. At least, that was the idea.

However, she was already off to a poor start. Standing up to Zhenhua and making a spectacle the previous day would prove to have been counterintuitive.

After their exercise, Tama split the girls into groups and led them to the bathhouse. Kari enjoyed bathing in the warm water, and she couldn't wait to go back. She could see how submitting to the fate of a concubine could tempt girls simply to indulge in the luxuries the palace offered, but it wasn't a life she wanted. She would gladly trade luxuries for freedom any day.

Suying must not have slept much either, though, probably for different reasons. She had purple bags under her eyes, and she was being unusually quiet. Of course, she had been quiet the day before, too, so perhaps she hadn't adjusted to their unfamiliar environment. If everything went as planned, she wouldn't have to.

Kari sank into the warm water. The warmth caressed her skin as the steam from the water brushed against her face. She couldn't help it—since she was in the bath, all she wanted was to relax and let the water wash away her troubles, but she couldn't allow herself to enjoy a single moment.

She washed her hair and skin, then returned to her main goal. All the bathtubs lined the back wall. They needed some way to keep the water heated. This meant they had to have a boiler room behind one of the walls or under the floor. Wherever there was a boiler room, there had to be easy access to the outside to transport wood or whatever fuel used to the boiler. If she could figure out where they were located, she might be able to deduce how to gain access to it and make her escape that way.

Kari finished with her bath, got out, and toweled off. She shivered as the cool air met her still-wet skin. Tama took Kari aside, as she did with each girl, then brushed her hair and helped her put makeup on.

"I just love these baths." Tama pulled on the brush caught in Kari's tangled brown hair, making Kari wince. "It's been so long since I've had a hot bath."

"Only the finest," Tama said coldly. Getting her to talk would not be easy.

"How do you keep the water so warm? Do you use magic?"

Tama didn't reply. She just kept to her work as she styled Kari's hair. When she had finished, she sent Kari and the other girls back to the main room.

Kari couldn't give up, not after only one attempt. Trying to get information out of the guards might appear suspicious, but she still had one other person she could ask who might just have an answer.

"Do you know anything about the hot baths?" Kari asked, approaching Ina.

"I guess," Ina replied, squinting her eyes. "Why do you ask?"

"I just want to know how they work. What do they heat the water with?" Kari asked, feigning curiosity.

"They burn wood, I believe." Ina eyed her. "From what I hear, the baths in Guanwa Hall are even bigger than these."

"The boiler room... How would you get into it? Where's it located?"

"Why would you need to know that?" Kari knew she was being too inquisitive, but she couldn't focus on that. She needed the information.

"I'm just curious about how it works." She had to be careful. Ina may seem friendly and pleasant, but she had championed palace life by saying it wasn't all bad. There was no telling how she would react if she knew the truth.

"Please don't take me for a fool." Ina sat on her bed, serenely folding her hands in her lap. "You're planning on escaping, aren't you?"

Kari had said too much. What to do now? Could she trust Ina with the truth or was a lie a better option? From what she had gathered, Ina was a prisoner just like Kari, but there was always the possibility the girl was a spy for the empire. That would explain why she was so helpful and knew so much about the storehouse.

Kari rubbed her eyes. Paranoia was overtaking her. A spy? It was such an odd conclusion to jump to. Logically, she had no reason not to trust Ina. The girl had been nothing but helpful to her and Suying since they arrived, but something wasn't right.

Kari got a strange vibe from Ina. Still, she couldn't base her decisions on vibes. She had no reason to suspect her. The paranoia was merely the result of her own irrational fears of being caught, but, even still, it was best not to risk it.

"No, of course not," Kari said. "I'm simply curious about how it works. I've never seen anything like it before."

"You don't have to lie to me." Ina's smile was warm and inviting. It was almost like she wanted Kari to trust her and drop her guard. "I'm sure you're not the first to think of escaping. Heaven knows I would do anything to leave here, too."

"Then why don't you try to?" There was that vibe again. Ina was hiding something—Kari was sure of it. Ina's continued contradictions of detesting the harem and embracing it were too odd to ignore.

"I can't." Ina stared at her necklace as she fiddled with it. "There is nothing for me outside these walls. I have to stay."

“Why?” What was she hiding?

“I just do.” Ina’s smile faded. “I have to see this through to the end.”

Kari sighed. “I don’t understand. But maybe it’s something I never can. If I have the opportunity to leave, I will take it in a single breath.”

Ina placed her hand to her forehead. “You can’t get to the boiler rooms. They built this place like a fortress so no one could escape. Do you honestly think they would leave an exit unguarded and open? Escaping is impossible. Even if you could get out of the storehouse, you are still locked behind the palace walls with nowhere to go. They will find you, and they will kill you. You should just accept where you are. Try to make the best of it.”

Kari sighed. So much for that idea. The boiler room would have been a longshot anyway, but it was the only option she could see. She hung her head in defeat, realizing she would have to rethink her escape.

“I’m sorry,” Ina said, clasping her hands. “I hate delivering bad news, but do take heart—your life will change soon. You will be an attendant. Once you are, you’ll have free rein of the palace and your life will begin anew.”

“Has anyone ever escaped?” Kari asked. If she couldn’t escape the storehouse, she would try the next best thing.

“I don’t know how they would.” Pausing, Ina tiredly rubbed her eyes. “But I’m sure one or two have fled the palace over the years, so it’s not impossible. But I don’t think those who become attendants are willing to leave.”

Kari’s options were limited. On one hand, she could take her chances and wait this ordeal out. Maybe she and Suying wouldn’t even be selected by the emperors. It was possible they would be released after six months, but that didn’t seem likely. Perhaps a better opportunity would present itself later, but that would more than likely mean having to succumb to the desires of their captors, at least for a time. She had to get out before then. Kari wasn’t going to risk becoming a conquest of the emperors. She would find a way to overcome and breathe the open air again.

Of course, that was it. She had been too busy trying to blend in to notice it. Why try to go through the walls when she could go *over* them?

The courtyard would be her best bet, though it presented a number of unique challenges. She would need to get there without being noticed while avoiding the guards who patrolled the walls and finding a way to scale their smooth surface.

Kari took a deep breath, cementing her plan in her mind. Those obstacles wouldn’t be a problem. She knew how she would escape