

The
Bearer of the Seed

Sample Chapters

RECORDS OF THE THREE REALMS

Book 2

Joshua Killingsworth

Chapter 1

The chosen day had arrived. Kari ascended the stairs to the Hall of Heaven and Earth, flanked on by her guard. It was strange. She had fought against tyranny, oppression, and juggernauts of might and strength, but this would be her greatest challenge. Once she entered the hall, her guards would no longer be able to protect her. They would depart, leaving her to fend for herself.

Kari's footsteps echoed against the marble stairs. Her dress, a silk ruqun, flowed eloquently in the breeze, its crimson color and gold embroidery a symbol to her status as empress. A golden phoenix adorned her skirt. Her brown hair was held up with an azure fengguan—a phoenix crown—adorned with nine phoenixes made of inlaid kingfisher feathers, topped with twelve golden dragons, and inset with precious pearls and gems. Specially made, the diadem was substantial in both weight and duty.

Her guards bowed in reverence before allowing her to enter. High Chancellor Cai Ren, her chief advisor, waited for her in the antechamber to the throne room.

"My lady." He clasped his hands together, bowing. Kari motioned for him to rise. "Administrator Zhouren sends a gift a wine — *the scoundrel*. He is calling for your death."

"He's not the only one," Kari said. She stared at the door to the throne room as her body quivered with apprehension. For most of her life, she was proud of her eyes. Vibrant eye colors were a Shagin trait, and hers fairly glowed green. Only now, she wished she could hide them and what she was.

Could she do this? Could she face the Guardian's ambassador with courage and turn his heart? A lump formed in her throat. There was no changing his mind. Rational people did not call for genocide.

"You'll do fine," Cai Ren said, noticing Kari's apprehension. "Show strength and prove to the nobility you truly have the mandate of heaven, or it will be civil war."

Kari's brow furrowed as she stared at him with her mouth agape. He smiled sheepishly as he rubbed the back of his neck.

Kari took a deep breath, pushing her anxiety down. She could do this.

Once she stepped through the door, she was on her own. Cai Ren couldn't assist her.

The Guardian had exterminated her people, and now his ambassador was seeking an explanation for her existence. It was an absurd request, on which her empire hinged. Her nobles and lords questioned her ability to rule. If she didn't prove the mandate of heaven, the right to rule, was indeed hers, they would revolt.

Kari entered the massive throne room filled with hundreds of ministers and lords. They kowtowed, bowing their heads. The nine grand pillars stretched to the golden ceiling. She made her way to the high dais in the center, escorted by Cai Ren. He would be with her, but only in a silent capacity.

She climbed the marble steps to the crimson-and-gold throne at the top of the platform. Two sizeable golden dragon statues flanked either side of the dais. It felt as if they watched as she ascended the stairs to the Throne of Unity.

She wished she didn't have to sit alone. The stage allowed her to be gawked at by the courts. Her only comfort was Cai Ren, who stood behind her.

As she sat, the entire court rose in unison, then dropped to their knees. Together, they proclaimed, "May grace and peace be with you, Your Majesty."

The ambassador didn't waste time. Charging forward between the rows of ministers, he stopped just shy of the dais. He held up a silver medallion with the symbol of the Guardian etched in it—a triskelion of three interwoven spirals. His stern look sent shivers through Kari.

"You've read my request, so what is your response?" he demanded, stomping his foot like a petulant child.

A silent chill fell over the Throne Room, all eyes fixated on her. The officials waited for her reply.

It was her throne, her court, yet, she was the one on trial. What kind of response could she give? How was Kari supposed to justify her existence?

The Guardian's ambassador continued to glare from the base of her dais. It was odd. Here she sat, the Empress of Xiang, surrounded by hundreds of her court officials, yet she was alone.

"Would you like me to repeat the question?" the ambassador snarled, stepping forward and placing a foot on the bottom stair of the dais. His tight clothes and large fur cloak marked him as a foreigner in a land accustomed to loose-fitting robes and silk. Despite being a stranger to Xiang, he wielded power and authority in equal respects to her, if not more so. He spoke for the Guardian of the Three Realms, after all. It would be scandalous for any other foreigner to show such disrespect, but for him, it was tolerated, accepted even.

Kari averted her eyes, not knowing how to answer. She had been preparing for this meeting for over a month. Well, putting it off was more accurate. A disturbing silence washed over the court as they waited for her to reply. Her reign had just begun, and there were already rumors of dissent and murmurs of civil war among them.

High Chancellor Cai Ren cleared his throat, taking his place at Kari's side. His face pointed straight ahead at the ambassador, but his eyes cut toward Kari in a silent reminder for her to show strength. He had been persistent in chastising her whenever her resolve faltered. Weakness only made the court question if she genuinely possessed the mandate of heaven.

Kari shook her head, straightening her posture. What was she doing? She had to face this with courage or risk undoing so much. If the court thought she had lost the mandate of heaven, she could lose the throne, bringing back the very tyranny she fought against.

"I grow tired of waiting." The ambassador climbed the stairs, stopping one short of the top. The officials gasped and murmured at his lack of respect and decorum. If he had been anyone else, he would be reprimanded and barred from the palace. And if she had been anyone else, he would be executed. "You are a Shagin! Explain yourself!"

Kari sighed, hanging her head. What could she say? Shagin was an all-female race who believed in the "wrong" god. For that, they were outlawed and murdered. The few Purge survivors now lived in exile on their sacred island of Mystikos, hidden away from the world. As far as the rest of the world was concerned, Shagin were extinct, except her.

"I am the empress of Xiang. This is my throne. I don't have to explain my existence to you," Kari said. The only reason the Guardian had sent an ambassador and not an assassin was because she was empress of one of the most powerful nations on Terra. Hopefully, that was enough to keep him at bay.

"You do realize it's a crime to be Shagin?" the ambassador demanded.

"It's a crime to be born?" Kari leaped to her feet, then stared at the ambassador. The officials murmured even more at her outburst, and Cai Ren buried his face in his hands. Kari didn't care.

There was no arguing with him or the Guardian. All pretenses of civilized debate ended at the murder of her people.

"The fourth amendment of the Triune Concordat clearly states Shagin are the enemies of humanity, and we must purge them. Xiang is in direct violation of the laws of the gods, and it now risks losing its sovereignty. There is only one remission that will restore justice."

"There is no justice in genocide!" Kari's aura flared, and spirit energy surged through her body. Light flashed at her fingertips. This man knew nothing of justice.

"My lady," Cai Ren said, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Kari closed her eyes and took a deep breath, regaining control. A part of her knew Cai Ren was right. She couldn't afford to give in to her anger and let the Guardian see the monster they feared. It wasn't fair. It was hypocrisy, a double standard the Guardian and his ilk didn't have to maintain. They could act like brutes, and the world would still revere them.

"The empress has shown compassion and restraint. She possesses none of the qualities of the old Shagin," an official shouted. Kari smiled; at least not all of her court had turned on her. Though she had shown them she was no different from them, the misconceptions of Shagin remained.

"The Shagin are monsters!" The ambassador turned away from Kari, speaking directly to the officials. "They have ransacked the world before, times beyond counting. They have stolen children, bewitched men, and now they have returned. Not just returned, mind you, the Shagin menace has already conquered this nation and enslaved you all. Yet, you defend this monster?"

"That is enough!" Kari balled her fists, then started down the stairs. Cai Ren grabbed her shoulder, pulling her back to the throne. She didn't fight him. If she descended to face the ambassador on his level, it would symbolically signal she wasn't worthy of her throne. Kari took a deep breath, relenting, and retook her seat.

The ambassador pointed at her in defiance. "Even now, she seeks to silence reason. She murdered the emperors. How many more will you let her kill? How many more nations must fall to her rule before you act? Except by then, it will be too late. Stand with the Guardian and cast out this vile creature!"

The throne room erupted in chattering officials arguing with each other.

"He speaks the truth. We are all doomed!" an official cried.

"You dare to question the will of heaven?"

"We must comply with the Guardian or lose our nation."

"Stand with the empress."

"Should a girl decide our fate?"

"Silence!" Cai Ren bellowed, and a sudden hush fell over the court.

"Chancellor, I beg of you," the ambassador said, turning toward Cai Ren. "I'm not asking you to execute her, just turn her over into my custody."

She was the empress—one without a say in her court. Kari slouched. She wanted to fade away—be anywhere but here.

"You have gone too far." Cai Ren had been an ally throughout the ordeal that put Kari on the Throne of Heaven. It was nice to see him defending her, even if it broke decorum. "You have insulted the heavens and the daughter of heaven. If you do not show respect to our empress, we will not show respect to you. Guards, show this barbarian to his quarters. Maybe tomorrow, if you have learned respect, you can be granted another audience in front of this court."

Kari sighed in relief as the guards escorted the ambassador out. She rubbed her forehead, grateful it was over. But it was just another delay. She would have to face the ambassador again. This time, she would need a better response. She feared if she kept stalling, the ambassador would lash out and try to take her life. It was what the Guardian wanted. Yet, she welcomed the deferrals.

Her court had just assembled, but she was tired. With a gesture, Kari dismissed them and retired to a rear antechamber.

She could breathe again. After she removed the phoenix crown, she untied her brown hair, letting it flow freely.

"Thank you for that," Kari said as Cai Ren entered the chamber behind her. She rested her crown on the altar before kneeling on a red cushion in front of a small table. Kari motioned for Cai Ren to join her on the opposite side.

"You shouldn't have ended court so early," Cai Ren chastised her. He refused the seat, pacing like a vulture circling its prey. "It makes you look weak. Like you are running away. Not to mention all the business you must attend to other than this fruitless inquiry from the Guardian."

"I know," Kari said, rubbing her burning eyes. She couldn't even bring herself to look at him. He had trusted in her for so long, yet it seemed she was always letting him down. "I just couldn't take anymore after hearing that barbarian talk so disparagingly about my people. I'm exhausted."

"Don't let his words get to you. Everyone in this nation knows your heart." Cai Ren stopped, stroking his black goatee. "But still, the fact remains that you *are* Shagin."

"Do you think I should just lay down my life because of what I am?" Kari shot to her feet, her voice louder than she intended.

"Not at all." Cai Ren held up his hands in a calming effort. He motioned for her to retake her seat as he knelt on the red cushion opposite her. "But you have to admit his suspicions seem warranted, at least from an outsider's perspective."

"I've done nothing to him—or anyone for that matter," Kari interjected. She dropped to her knees, defeated. It didn't matter what she did. Shagin were different. They were monsters to the rest of the world.

"The last time the Shagin were seen, they went to war against the Guardian. Now the Terran Union is in shambles, if you can even consider it still exists at all. The union is merely a name now," Cai Ren explained. He leaned over the table, clasped her hands in his. "They have a right to fear you. To fear what you can do. Your achievements cannot be understated. In a few months, you went from songstress to attendant to empress."

"If you recall, you're the one who pulled me into this to begin with," Kari said, tugging away. She stared at the decorative ceiling. Beams of gold accentuated the crimson wood. Jade figures rose from the floor to the ceiling—a tiger, a tortoise, a dragon, and a phoenix. It was a lavish room in a decadent palace centered in an impoverished city, and her subjects expected her to restore prestige to the land. Even her silk ruqun with its crimson pattern and gold phoenix embroidery only served to mask what was underneath. "I never asked for any of it."

"You saved this empire from tyranny. For that, you have mine and so many others eternal gratitude. But as you said, you didn't ask for this." Cai Ren stared, unblinking. "Abdicate the throne."

"Abdicate?" Kari asked, taken aback. "To whom?"

"Without an heir of your own, as High Chancellor, you would abdicate to me," Cai Ren said, returning to his feet. He began to pace again. "It is not an easy decision to make, I understand.

With you as empress, I feel war will come to this nation. If you abdicate, you can show the world your graciousness. They will see you not as a conqueror, but for what you truly are – a savior.”

“I don’t know,” Kari said. On the one hand, Cai Ren knew far more about politics than she did, but something about abdicating didn’t sit right. He had pushed for it when she ascended the throne, and she had refused. It wasn’t like she desired power or even wanted to be the empress, but giving it up would invalidate the sacrifices made to achieve it.

“So long as you are empress, I can only do so much to protect you. But as a hero of the people, I can shield you from the Guardian,” Cai Ren pleaded.

“I can protect myself.” That was clear for all to see. She had defeated a peerless warrior thought to be undefeatable, and she had spent the time since then training. The strength of her spirit energy greatly surpassed what it had been months ago.

“Then do it for the people of Xiang. We are barely maintaining control of the kingdom as it is. The fall of the Tian has weakened the resolve of various warlords. Without their support, we cannot maintain order. Many doubt following a Shagin.”

Kari winced at his words. Even the people she saved still thought of her as a monster. “If the Guardian comes with his army, they might not side with us. This nation will fall.”

Kari placed her face in her hands. The pressures of the throne were overwhelming. Too many lives depended on her every action. Perhaps it was best to give the kingdom to Cai Ren. “It is something to consider.”

“Please do.” Cai Ren said, shooting her a sideways look.

“I have to go.” Kari stood and clasped her hands, a sign of respect to her advisor. “I have somewhere I need to be.”

Kari bid farewell to Cai Ren, summoning a sedan chair to return her to her small house. She had chosen to stay in the home she had when she was an attendant. It was the only place she felt safe. Wanting nothing to do with the Emperor’s Mansion, she refused to live there. Besides, she couldn’t stand any reminders of what the Tian brothers did to her.

Unfortunately, that might be hard now. Kari placed her hands on her stomach. Damn those bastards.

Chapter 2

Kari grunted as the eunuchs bumped along, shaking the sedan chair. She pulled the red silk curtain closed, not wanting to see anyone. It was awkward having her subjects carry her, and she tired of the presence of people. Preparing and waiting for the court proved tumultuous. Now, her emotions fluttered with what the future may bring.

The guards set the sedan chair down at the entrance of her house, then helped her dismount. Kari squinted as sun rays reflected off the golden roof. She took a deep breath, but the crushing fear of her anxiety dwarfed her best efforts to calm herself. The doctor she had requested knelt before her as she descended.

"May grace and peace be with you, Your Majesty," the doctor said, averting his gaze.

"Thank you," Kari said. She still wasn't used to the reverence everyone showed her. "You may stand."

"My lady, are you ready?" Doctor Liujilai asked as he stood.

"I am," she lied, but it no longer mattered if she was ready. She needed to know. Kari took another deep breath, motioning for him to follow. "You may come with me."

They toed off their shoes, then the doctor followed Kari through the two entrance doors into her house. The first led into a vestibule with a decorative screen painted with a golden peacock. A second led into the inner courtyard.

Kari had taken great efforts to beautify her garden. She always carried a small pouch of seeds tied to her waist, which she'd collected from the Imperial Gardens. Using her plant magic, she'd grown the most beautiful assortment of flowers. Lavender, orchids, and roses filled the small courtyard.

In the center was a tall cherry blossom tree. She had used her power to grow it to its adult height. Unfortunately, the blossoms were out of season by the time she planted the tree. While she could use her energy to force the tree to bloom, it just didn't seem right to do so.

They crossed through the stone path to her bedchambers. Kari slid the door shut and sat on her bed, waiting for the doctor to begin.

The doctor bowed again out of respect before approaching her. "Any symptoms?" the old doctor asked, crouching in front of Kari.

She shook her head. "I don't believe so. I haven't been sleeping well, but I think that's due to stress."

"I see. So, how long has it been?" the doctor asked, placing a hand on her forehead. His hands were cold and clammy. Was he as nervous as she was?

"About three weeks," Kari replied. Her cycle was usually regular. She had thought it was merely the stress of recent events and assuming control of the throne, which caused her to be late, but after three weeks, she was beginning to worry. The Imperial Brothers had abducted her, and to save her friends and end their tyranny, Jiaorong forced her to sleep with him. It wasn't what she wanted, and now it seemed the cruelty he inflicted was yet to end.

"I see." The doctor took Kari's wrist, placing two fingers on the inside and his thumb on the out. He tilted his head, closing his eyes as if he were listening for a faint sound. After a short while, he opened his eyes and smiled. Dread filled her. She wasn't sure if him smiling was a good sign. "Congratulations, you have a happy pulse."

“A happy pulse? What does that mean?” Kari asked, but she already knew the answer. Her query was more in pursuit of a response to dispel her fears, which she did not expect to receive.

“It means that soon, you will have an heir to your throne.”

Damn.

Kari placed her hands on her stomach, feeling like she was going to throw up. Why? Why did she have to be pregnant? And why with his child?

Kari would do just about anything not to be. She had sacrificed so much, given up so much of herself to the Tian brothers to end their cruelty. Why was she now being forced to give even more of herself? It didn't seem fair. The Fates must despise her.

The doctor waited for her reaction. Sensing her apprehension, he raised his eyebrows in concern.

“Thank you for your assistance. But please don't tell anyone.” They would find out eventually, but she needed time to get used to it first.

“You want it to be a surprise?” the doctor asked.

“Something like that.” Kari stood and walked toward the open window, staring into the courtyard.

“Of course, Your Majesty.” The doctor bowed and left, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

Kari crashed onto her bed, her head slamming on her soft pillow. This was a nightmare. She would never be able to forget. Never be able to escape what they did to her. It was her worst fear come to life.

Again, she placed her hands on her stomach. It seemed so flat and tiny. It was hard to believe she was carrying a baby. She was only seventeen, too young to have a child of her own. This wasn't how she wanted it; she wasn't ready.

She draped her arms over her face.

“Not that bastard's child.”

Kari shook her head. No, the little one would be hers. She sat up, staring at her belly.

“I will love you forever,” she lied, trying to convince herself more than her unborn child. She didn't feel love toward it, more like dread and regret. Surely her feelings would eventually change. At least, she hoped so.

The night came. With it, the company of friends. Kari ignored her servants' request and dismissed them early, making the tea herself. She found tea to be quite therapeutic. It wasn't even the tea itself, but the preparation she enjoyed the most—finding the right balance of heat and water and the combination of leaves. But most of all, it was the sound of pouring the tea ever so slowly into brittle cups and listening to the change in decibels as it filled.

She poured Ina a cup from her jade tea set. When she offered Ronin a cup, he refused and held up a bottle of rice wine instead. She had invited them here to tell them the truth—that she was expecting—but now she wanted to do anything else. If she could run away, she would. It was a silly thought; these were her friends. They should be the first to know.

Ina was a lovely young woman, slightly older than Kari with jet-black hair, phoenix eyes, and porcelain skin. Kari's closest friend, her heart's sister, Ina's tragic life mirrored her own. Her blue-and-white ruqun accentuated her natural beauty.

Ronin was the brother Kari had never known. He was a Kitsuno Kai, a wolf among men. An expert swordsman, his ghostly presence still sent chills down her spine. He was never without his double kodachis, which he wore underneath his trademark ankle-length black coat. His entire wardrobe was black, except for the light blue sash he wore beneath his outerwear. When she met

him, his very demeanor filled her with dread, but they shared the same father. Because of that, he became her most trusted ally through the horrible ordeal with the Tian.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" Ina asked, setting her tea down.

Hesitating, Kari bit her lip. She wanted to tell them about the life she carried. Desperately, she desired to lay her burdens at their feet. She needed their support more than ever. But still, she couldn't bring herself to say the words. It would make her situation real.

What would Ina think? Would she blame herself? After all, Kari first laid with Jiaorong to save Ina's life. Ina had shown her gratitude by standing by her side in Kari's final confrontation with Jiaorong, but now it didn't feel like enough.

Kari closed her eyes. It wasn't fair for her to burden them. Not yet, anyway. It wasn't Ina's fault. It was Jiaorong's and his alone.

Kari had to change the subject. "Cai Ren asked me to abdicate. Since I don't have an heir, as High Chancellor, the throne would fall to him."

"Cai Ren is a snake," Ronin said, downing his rice wine. "He only wants you to abdicate so that he can have power. That's been his plan from the start."

"But why shouldn't she abdicate?" Ina protested. She studied Kari. "I'm not saying you should, but you should do what makes you happy."

"What makes me happy?" Kari's words trailed off as she placed a hand on her stomach. She was a blossom forced to bloom out of season. In that regard, it no longer mattered what she wanted. They'd taken the choice from her, just like so many others. "I don't even know what that is anymore. I never had a choice in any of this. What do you think I should do?"

Ina had been a victim of the Tian's harem, too. They shared the same struggles. Surely, she would have the answers.

"I fear the direction the nation will take without you as its leader," Ina said. Smiling, she took another sip of her tea. Kari returned the gesture. She was glad her friend enjoyed her tea. It was a small joy, but that was all she could hope for sometimes. "Cai Ren would have no use for a harem, but he is a traditionalist. If he takes the throne, it will only undo what little change you've already accomplished. Women will still be second-class citizens. Eventually, the harem will return. But I know you don't want this life. I see the stress it places on you; you're not happy. But I also know the sacrifices you've made to get here, and I would hate for it to all be for nothing. Maybe you should nominate your successor?"

"You can't," Ronin said, lounging in his chair. "Succession is passed through blood, not proclamation. If you attempt that, there will be revolt and power struggle. You would plunge the land into a civil war."

"If it has to be a blood relative, what about you?" Kari asked. "Isn't that an option? After all, you know more..."

"I refuse," Ronin said, cutting her off. Eyes narrowing, he sat upright. He tapped the table with his index finger in cadence with his words. "The Kitsuno Kai won't stand by anyone but you. The empire is severely weakened. If the throne doesn't demonstrate strength, it will be civil war. Let me lead the Kitsuno Kai, and we will secure stability through whatever means necessary. That way, you can focus on doing what you feel is right."

"How am I supposed to know what's right and wrong?" Kari asked. It was all too much. When she was fighting a tyrant, it was so much easier to understand what she should do, what was right. She'd had to make hard choices—had sacrificed so much—to end the oppression, but she understood what was right. Here, she didn't comprehend anything. There was too much gray,

too much pressure. She wanted nothing more than to go back to being a simple songstress, but she'd moved beyond that modest life. The entire world knew about her – the sole Shagin who had toppled a nation.

"I hope I'm not intruding," Cai Ren said, entering the great room.

"You are," Ronin said bluntly.

"How did you get in?" Ina asked.

"I'm sorry, my lady." Cai Ren bowed toward Kari. "Since you had forgone any personal servants to attend to your needs this evening, I didn't want to disturb you, so I let myself in."

Sighing, Kari rubbed her hand through her brown hair. "We were just discussing our plans for the future."

"Then perhaps your chief advisor should be present?" Cai Ren demanded.

"It doesn't concern you," Ronin said, jumping to his feet. He glared at Cai Ren. His right hand twitched and flexed, hovering over the hilt of his kodachi.

Ignoring the aggression, Cai Ren turned his nose up in disdain. "Your Majesty, may I speak with you in private?"

"Of course." Kari nodded. A fight breaking out between the men was the last thing she wanted. Especially since Ronin didn't know the meaning of restraint, and he very well might cut Cai Ren down.

Ronin dropped into his chair, but he did not take his eyes off the other man. Cai Ren flicked his sleeve in contempt before leaving the great room with Kari following behind.

The moon was poised high in the dark sky. The cool summer breeze rustled the flowers and leaves, sending a refreshing scent of nature to Kari's nostrils. They took a seat on a bench in the center of the courtyard underneath the tall cherry tree. Even though they weren't in season, the tree was still beautiful.

"The night's beautiful," Kari focused her gaze on the moon as it peeked through the leaves of the tree. "It took me a while to notice how lovely the palace is. But it's all a façade. I know what lies beyond these walls, a city of depression and sorrow."

"You seem melancholy. Have you already heard the news?" Cai Ren asked, his expression stern and solemn.

"No, what news?"

"Eastern Xia attacked Sui Han." Cai Ren said. "Administrator Yoon is dead. It appears it will be civil war after all."

"How? When?" Kari's heart sank. Administrator Yoon had been one of her few allies and a friend.

"Yoon took casualties in our attempted capture of the capital. His alliance with you demonstrated him as a traitor, at least to those loyal to the Tian." Cai Ren stood, then turned his back to Kari. "Perceived weakness and moral justification seem to be all that was needed."

"They must know we won't stand for this?" Kari said, louder than she intended.

"I don't think they care." Cai Ren cut his eyes toward her, pacing in circles. "There are rumblings of dissent among the other lords as well. It won't be the only rebellion. The warlords are geared up for battle."

She didn't have the resolve to fight a war. Too many people would die, and she didn't want their deaths on her hands. She already carried too much blood. How much more could she take?

"What do I do?"

"The solution hasn't changed. We have to show strength and crush these rebellions." Pausing, Cai Ren rubbed his chin. "We've talked about this before, but perhaps you should abdicate to me. I don't believe you have the heart for this."

"Maybe that would be for the best." Kari stared at the ground, chest tight and breathing shallow.

"The role you are best suited for is that of champion of the people. I can rule and accomplish that which you are unable. Together, we are stronger, but only if we play to our strengths."

"It's strategy," Kari surmised, exhaling.

"Precisely," Cai Ren replied, his expression softening. "And with me on the throne, more of the traditional lords will be willing to accept my rule."

Cai Ren's words pierced Kari's heart.

"Because I'm a woman?" She stared at the moon. Ina was right—nothing would change. Everything they went through would be meaningless.

"To put it bluntly, yes."

Kari stood and approached Cai Ren, staring up at him. "And then what? What was the point of all of this if nothing changes?"

"Listen to reason," Cai Ren said, retreating. "As you stated, this is strategy. As a eunuch, I am less than a man and never intended to inherit the mandate of heaven. Do you think I won't get resistance as well for being what I am? This might not be a perfect option, but it's the best we have available. We cannot focus on what we want, but about what the land needs. Xiang is steeped in traditions, which you can't change. They will kill you before they allow that."

"What's going on out here?" Ronin asked, entering the courtyard. Ina followed closely behind.

"We could hear you from inside," Ina said, sliding the door shut behind her.

Cai Ren paced around the cherry blossom. "We were just discussing Kari abdicating the throne."

"I'm uncertain. I would like time to think it through," Kari said. If she stepped down now, the harem would return. Not under Cai Ren, but his successor. She placed a hand on her stomach. But if she kept the throne, she could ensure the harem didn't return, at least for a few generations. Her bloodline, the Shagin bloodline, was all female.

Maybe, when the time was right, she could even use her power to bring the rest of Shagin to the mainland and save her people. She smiled at the thought.

"Think this through? You've had time enough," Cai Ren spat. "A decision must be made now! You do not have the strength to destroy these rebels. They will continue, and they will grow in number if we do not act now! You are a good woman, but I fear your sentiment will doom us all."

"I know I can't put this off forever, but I need a little more time to think through the implications," Kari said. He was right. She didn't have the willpower to wage war, but there was still so much she could accomplish. Somehow, she would find a way.

She gazed at the moon. Its light reflected on her, the same way she wanted her light to reflect on the world.

A white ball struck her cheek, sending a jolt of pain across her face. The ball erupted on impact, filling the air with powder and smoke. Kari swatted at the smoke. Her knees buckled, and she collapsed to all fours.

She coughed, her arms trembling to support her weight. What happened?

Ronin drew his kodachis, then lunged at Cai Ren.

Cai Ren hurled another white ball. It struck Ronin's chest, exploding into a puff of white smoke. Dropping his swords, Ronin fell to his knees.

"You bastard..." Ronin's eyes rolled back into his head, and he collapsed to the ground.

"Ina," Kari cried. "Run!"

Ina gasped, her eyes wide as she sprinted to the other side of the courtyard. Cai Ren took out another white ball from his robes, flinging it at her. The ball struck her in the back, and the white smoke coated her. Ina fell to the ground without resistance.

Kari struggled to her feet, focusing her spirit energy. Her hands tingled, but her power didn't manifest. She had to get out of here. Her survival was crucial. Cai Ren would pay for this.

She darted for the nearby wall. Her vision blurred and spun. As she leaped at the wall, she grabbed hold of its top ledge. Her muscles ached, her arms shaking as she pulled herself up. Her lungs were on fire, and her skin burned at the effort.

"Why won't you stay down?" Cai Ren threw another ball at her.

It struck the wall beside her. The blast of smoke sent her careening to the ground. She screamed, landing with a thud.

"Breathe deep, my friend," Cai Ren said, standing over her.

Her body ached and burned. She reached out to Cai Ren, her arm trembling. She wanted to ask him why he'd done this, but only groans escaped her lips. Body convulsing, she rolled onto her back, gripping her spasming chest.

She couldn't breathe.

Was this her death?

Her body went numb, and her arms fell to her side.

Blankly, she gazed at the moon. The shining orb doubled before her world faded to black.

Chapter 3

Kari blinked as her eyes adjusted to the light, and the world came back into view. Her head smacked against the wooden floor, sending a jolt of pain through her skull. She laid in the back of a carriage, Ronin and Ina beside her, still unconscious. When she tried to place her hands on her head, she couldn't. Someone had bound her hands in front of her. Not this again.

A single soldier garbed in gray lamellar armor with a straight short sword strapped to his waist sat in the back with them, while another soldier drove the coverless carriage. They were amid a massive caravan of some forty or fifty wagons heading across a large field toward a city near the woods.

Armed soldiers filled some of the other carriages, while others were prisoners with their hands bound. By the look of the architecture, they were no longer in Xiang. The buildings lacked the decorative curved roofs. Instead, they were square and consisted of elaborate systems of decorative posts extending down the sides of the buildings. The posts were set about a foot away with beams connecting them to the building at regular intervals. They descended the corners and around the windows, forming a decorative railing that started from the roof and moved down, framing the windows, connecting to the sills, and extending to the ground.

"It's about time one of you is awake," the soldier said. "You've been out for days."

That explained Kari's empty stomach and dry mouth. Possibly even the general sense of fatigue she felt, although that could be the lingering effects of the white poison powder.

Kari glared as she crawled to sit upright on the bench. She nudged Ronin with her foot. His eyes shot wide, and he glanced around their surroundings.

He held up his bound hands. "Lovely." He sighed.

"Who are you?" Kari asked the guard. She pulled on her bindings, but it was no use. Her spirit energy was gone. Without it, her enhanced strength was gone, too. "Where are you taking us?"

The soldier smiled. "You'll find out soon enough."

Kari stared at Ronin. They shouldn't have much issue escaping, at least if they were at full strength. She wasn't sure about him, but her head was still fuzzy from whatever poison Cai Ren had used. It might be better to wait until the effects entirely wore off before fighting their way to freedom.

Ronin must have thought the same. He wasn't making any effort to flee just yet. He knelt beside Ina, trying to wake her. He seemed to have a plan already. At least, Kari hoped so. Why else would he take the time to wake Ina? He never seemed to be overly fond of her before. In fact, he didn't seem to be overly fond of anyone.

Kari didn't have much in the way of weapons. Her seed pouch and Ronin's swords were gone. That just left her light powers.

"So, you're the famous Shagin empress? You don't look so impressive to me."

"I'm not the Shagin empress," Kari glared at the soldier. "I'm Shagin who just so happens to be the empress of Xiang."

"Not anymore, you're not." The soldier laughed.

Kari balled her fists. She pulled against the bindings wrapped around her wrists, but they did not give. Resistance was useless until her spirit energy returned. She hadn't gone through everything in Xiang just to end up as another prisoner riding to an unknown fate.

Ina stirred, and Ronin helped her onto the bench.

"Quiet back there," the driver demanded. "We're approaching Sumar. We don't want a fuss when we arrive. That goes for you too, Irfan. Shut up and sit down. Once we are there, we'll get our reward."

The name Sumar sounded familiar, but Kari couldn't place from what nation. Either way, it confirmed her fears, Xiang was long behind them.

"Hear that, princess? Don't go making a fuss just yet. I hear they have big plans for you."

Kari clenched her jaw. She didn't like this. There was no telling how long her spirit energy would be gone. She was done being someone else's prisoner. As soon as she had enough strength, she was getting them out of here.

They could easily lose their captors in the woods. That was where her plant magic gave her the upper hand, not to mention her newfound light abilities. She had experimented over the past month with different light constructs. The light whip was the easiest to use, but she was sure she could make a tool for just about any need.

The forest looked ancient. Even from a distance, the trees looked more massive than any she had seen before. They had to stand nearly three hundred feet high with trunks nearly forty feet round.

The soldier cut his eyes from her to the forest.

"Look familiar, Your Majesty?" He grinned. "It should. That there is the Latari Forest."

Kari's heart nearly stopped. A wave of panic washed over her. Not here. Anywhere but here.

"The Latari Forest, but that's..." Ina stopped mid-sentence. She placed her hands on Kari's. "Why would they take us here?"

"We're leaving," Ronin flexed and pulled at his bindings, trying to break free.

This was where she was going to die—where her people had been hunted down, tortured, brutalized, and murdered. The largest genocide in history—the Shagin Purge—occurred here. Before them were the remains of the Shagin Nation.

Damn it! Kari didn't have so much as a tingle from her spirit energy. She yanked on her bindings. Without her aura, though, there was no give.

"What are you doing? Stop that," the soldier demanded.

"Fool, release these bindings now, and I'll let you live." Ronin stood, facing the soldier.

This couldn't be happening. Why did the world hate Shagin so much? If Cai Ren wanted the throne, she would gladly give it to him. All that she wanted to do was to live, but her life was outlawed. Her existence was a crime against humanity. For that, she had to die. That was their law. That was their morality.

Humanity was corrupt. The entire human species could be so barbaric and unjust. To condemn an entire group of people to die was the highest act of cruelty. These people did not know her. She hadn't done them wrong, but because of her blood and heritage, she had to die with the rest of Shagin.

Kari's face reddened as rage flared inside her.

If they wanted her life, they were going to have to take it. Kari wasn't going to lie down and die just because they demanded it. She would meet their injustice with her own justice and vengeance for her slain sisters. Kill them all if she had to.

Kari stood. Her weak legs buckled beneath her in the bouncing carriage. She wasn't sure if that was the side effect of the poison or her trembling emotions at this point, but it didn't matter. Nothing was going to stand in her way. "Ina, are you ready?"

Ina nodded in reply, and Kari cut her eyes toward Ronin. A large smirk formed on his face.

“What the devil’s going on back there?” the driver demanded.

Without hesitation, Ronin lunged at the soldier. With his hands still bound, Ronin grabbed the soldier’s sword before he had time to react, unsheathed it, and drove it into his chest. The soldier stared in horror as Ronin ripped the sword out of his body, spraying blood into the air. With one swift kick to the chest, he knocked the soldier over the side of the cart.

“Help! Help,” the driver screamed.

Ronin held the blade out. Kari slid her bindings on its edge, freeing her hands. She took the sword, then cut his and Ina’s bindings.

“We have to move,” Kari ordered. Other soldiers quickly descended from their carriages, rushing toward them. Kari leaped over the side of the cart. Her legs buckled. They gave way as she hit the ground, collapsing to her side. She was still weak from the poison.

Ina landed beside her, face-first in the grass, while Ronin dropped to his hands and knees. He was shaking and unsteady as he helped them up. All three reeled from the poison’s effects. Any prolonged fighting wasn’t going to end well.

Two soldiers drew their swords as they approached. Kari hated killing. Every time she killed someone, it felt like the memories of their lost potential would haunt her. She could see the faces of everyone she’d ever killed in her sleep; all the people who died because of her. Kari wished she lived in a world where killing wasn’t a regular occurrence. She never wanted to hurt anyone again. But these weren’t people. They were murderers. They’d sold their morality, their humanity, to be subservient to the orders of a genocidal Guardian. They looked at her like she was a monster, so she would no longer defend her existence with mere words. Instead, she would do it with the edge of a sword.

Kari stood beside Ronin. The pair rushed forward at the first two soldiers. The first, obviously an inexperienced fighter, swung wildly at Ronin. He sidestepped, dodging the incoming strike. Carrying forward with his momentum, he rammed his elbow into the soldier’s face. Without breaking his stride, Ronin dropped to the ground and kicked the soldier’s feet out from under him. The soldier hit the ground, dropping his weapon. Ronin snatched up the sword, then mounted the soldier. With one quick slash, he opened the soldier’s throat, pouring bright red blood onto the green grass.

The other soldier attacked, swinging his blade at Kari’s head. She parried the sword strike and launched forward, driving her blade through his chest. He groaned as blood oozed from the wound. She pulled the sword out, and blood splattered her soft skin.

Her hands trembled. Killing was becoming easier. She gripped the hilt of the sword tightly, steadying her hands. But there was no time to reflect on it now. Enemy soldiers rushed toward them.

“Run!” Kari cried. She turned and grabbed Ina’s hand, pulling her as they made a mad dash to the forest. The only hope they had of losing their captors was in the woods. There was nowhere to run in the open plains.

Behind them, the soldiers clattered, and their feet erupted in a stampede of thuds as they made chase. Their yelling and banging were slowly drowned out by the sound of galloping hooves against the earth. The forest was such a long way away. They weren’t going to make it.

Damn her lack of foresight! Kari should have known better than to try to escape while her spirit energy had yet to return. She gritted her teeth. This was her fault. These soldiers were after her, and it was her shortsightedness that began the battle before they were ready. Their deaths would be on her hands. The situation called for it, however. She wasn’t going to die here at their command.

“Down!” Ronin knocked them to the ground as a blade swung by their heads as the first mounted soldier passed by in a thunderous gallop.

They stood to their feet as horse-mounted soldiers quickly surrounded them.

“You should feel honored,” Ronin cried out to the soldiers. “Today, you get to die by the hands of a Kitsuno Kai and one of the most powerful Shagin ever to live.”

Was he bluffing or being arrogant? There was no way they could fight them all in their current condition. Kari tried to focus her energy. Damn it, she still wasn’t getting anything.

The first cavalry unit charged forward. Ina dropped to the ground while Kari and Ronin rolled out of the way. One mounted soldier pulled out of rank, charging at the group. Ronin leaped up as the soldier slashed downward with his sword. Ronin dodged the strike and swung with his own, but the horse was too fast. He missed as the soldier galloped past.

“Get ready to run,” Ronin said. He wiped at the sweat dripping down his forehead. Even though he was too weak to fight, he was still willing to do so for her. There had to be something she could do.

Ronin charged forward as another horse and soldier rushed toward them. The soldier readied his sword to strike, and Ronin did the same. He met the soldier’s blow, his sword striking the soldier’s wrist, lobbing off his hand. The man screamed, letting go of his reins. Ronin slashed at the horse, drawing blood across its chest. It reared back in pain, throwing the soldier from his saddle onto the ground. Ronin didn’t stop. He charged forward into the line of cavalry, frantically swinging his sword. It was enough to scare the horses and riders alike, who quickly darted from his reach.

“Go!” Ronin screamed.

Kari hesitated. She couldn’t leave him. Ina tugged on her arm, her eyes wide and filled with panic. Kari’s nostrils flared. Ronin wouldn’t die. He was too stubborn to do so.

Kari and Ina dashed into the opening Ronin made, running toward the forest. With every step, Kari’s legs threatened to give under her. This was a horrible plan. They weren’t going to make it. But if she was going to die, she wanted to die fighting.

A horse-drawn carriage rushed in front, stopping their advance. It was the driver from earlier. He leaped out of the transport, drawing his sword.

Kari jumped as an arrow struck next to her. She turned to face the archer. He aimed, releasing another shot. Yelping, she swung her sword. It hit the shaft of the arrow, knocking it out of the air.

She couldn’t see Ronin, but a crowd of soldiers had surrounded where he had been before. Her heart raced to the point of breaking. Hopefully, he was okay.

Kari and Ina sprinted around the other side of the carriage, away from the sight of the archer. Now would be a perfect time to use her light powers and turn invisible. She didn’t have any spirit energy, not even the slightest bit of an aura to protect herself.

Kari screamed as a blade swung at her head. She dove to the ground, avoiding the attack. The driver was back. Ina cried out and tackled the man, knocking him to the ground. Kari stood, ready to finish off the driver. Three more soldiers appeared from around the carriage, drawing her attention.

These soldiers were better equipped with thicker steel armor and wielding spears. Kari clenched her jaw. Could she truly fight without her spirit energy? These soldiers wouldn’t hesitate to kill them, and she wouldn’t be able to slice through their armor with her sword. She needed her magic.

"Get behind me," Kari ordered, grabbing Ina and lifting her. She would still defend her friend at any cost. Ina rushed around her as Kari faced her new opponents. The soldiers thrust with their spears. She parried, but a second thrust kept her from being able to follow with her own attack. Without her spirit aura, she couldn't afford to take even a glancing blow.

The three soldiers struck out with their spears, each thrust forcing Kari back. It was all she could do to defend herself. She parried strike after strike, but it was becoming more futile. What little strength she had was fading quickly.

Ina screamed as more armed soldiers appeared. One grabbed her, shoving her to the ground. The soldier raised his sword for the killing blow.

Kari had already lost one friend. She wasn't going to lose another.

"No!" she screamed. Using all her strength, she swung her free hand. A flash of light erupted from her fingers as a whip made out of solid light appeared in her hand. She slashed at the soldier. The whip struck his shoulder and traveled through the other side of his abdomen, cleaving him in half.

"Ahh!" Kari screamed as pain pulsed through her skull. Her light whip dissipated, and she dropped her sword and grabbed at her head. The exertion was too much in her weakened condition, the blinding pain forcing her to her knees. Her vision doubled, but Kari gritted her teeth. She couldn't lose consciousness. She had to save Ina.

The driver stood above her with his sword raised, but she couldn't move. Her strength was utterly gone. Her arms trembled as she attempted to raise them, but to no avail.

Kari closed her eyes as the driver swung his sword at her neck. But the blade never contacted its target.

Kari looked up. Standing in front of her was a tall, beautiful blonde woman in a flowy white dress. A pink symbol made up of a circle with an upside-down arrow surrounded by two dots adorned the back of her dress. Her bare arm was all she used to block the blade.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded, knocking the sword away.

The soldiers quickly dropped their weapons, falling to their knees in submission. The woman wasn't alone, either. More soldiers wearing shiny silver armor surrounded them. The same symbol that was on the woman's dress was also on the soldiers' armor – except it was blue instead of pink.

"This woman," the driver argued. "She killed my brother."

"And I would have, too." The woman's sapphire-blue eyes shot daggers. "She is to be my guest, and here you are treating her like another common prisoner. Were you going to kill her?"

"She's a Shagin monster."

Kari winced at the driver's words.

The woman's spirit energy exploded from her. Kari never felt anything like it before. The woman had to be immensely strong for Kari to be able to sense her aura like this.

The woman's expression hardened. She wanted to kill this man. Instead, she merely snapped her fingers.

Two of the silver knights surrounded the driver, seizing him by the arm.

"You should count yourself lucky I'm in a forgiving mood after that comment. The fact remains you have defied my orders, and you will be held accountable for your actions."

The two silver knights escorted the driver away without a further word.

"I'm so sorry about this." The woman turned toward Kari, her expression softening. She held out a hand, helping Kari to her feet. "I never meant for this to happen; you have to believe me. I

thought it would be best to hire mercenaries to bring you here instead of using our own knights. I didn't want to tip off the Xianese to what we were planning."

Kari rubbed her eyes. "Ina, where's Ina?"

"I'm here," Ina hurried over and hugged her. She was bruised and cut, but unharmed.

"I am Ilyia," the woman continued. "It is a pleasure to finally meet you, Kari. This must be one of your retainers?"

"I suppose," Kari ignored the question. "Where's my brother?"

Ronin walked toward them, escorted by another woman. He waved, bloody but alive. The woman with him was just as strange as Ilyia. She wore thick orange-and-black clothing – padded armor most likely. A black mask revealed only her bright green eyes, red lips, and the scarred flesh surrounding them. Black and orange dyed rope and leather strips attached to the covering created the appearance of hair.

"By the gods, you're covered in blood," Ina exclaimed.

"It's not mine." Ronin smirked.

"This is one tough bastard," the masked woman said. "Poisoned, yet he still managed to kill seventeen armed soldiers."

"Artemis, if you think that's impressive, you should have seen Kari," Ilyia said with a smile. "Even with Aura's poison powder, she was still able to conjure her light whip."

They'd orchestrated this? "What do you want with me?" Kari asked.

"I told you, I want you to be my guest," Ilyia responded, holding out a hand for Kari to take.

"You're Shagin?" Kari asked, fixated on the Shagin insignia on Ilyia's dress.

"Yes, we are."