

# The Assassin's Gift

The Emperor's Conspiracy

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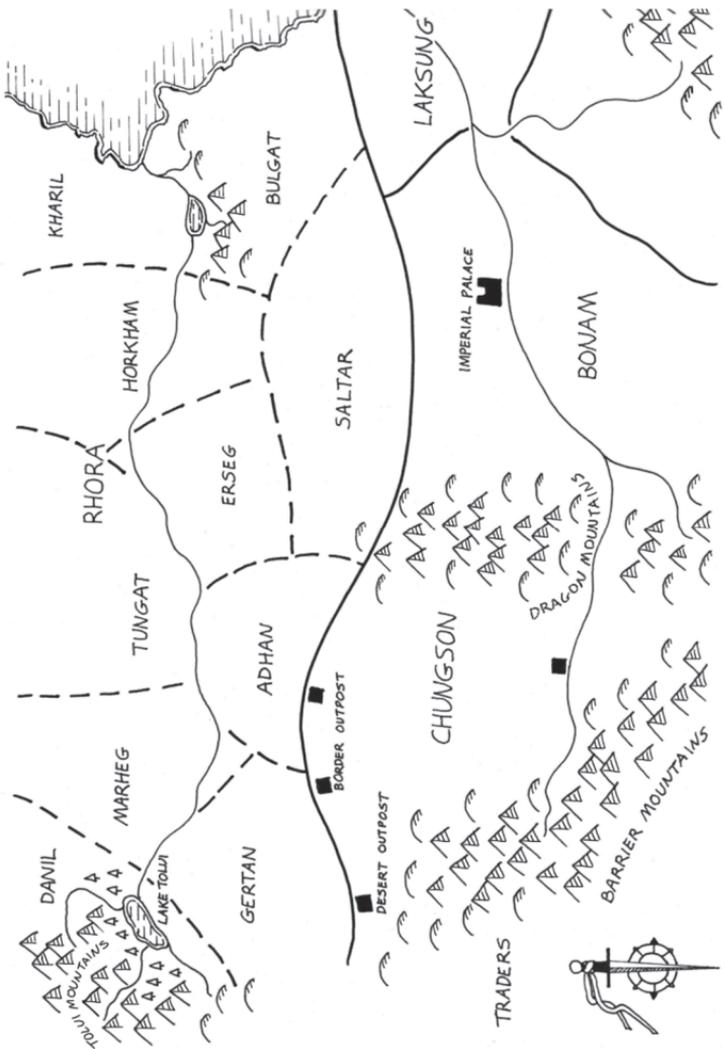
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*If you know the enemy and know yourself you need not fear the  
result of a hundred battles.*

*Sun Tzu*



## Chapter 1

Today she would kill a man. That fact dominated State Princess Lien's thoughts as she walked over the bridge into the emperor's garden seeking solitude.

She paused under the shade of the Maidenhair tree, ran her hand over the rough bark. The tension in her shoulders eased as she inhaled deeply and enjoyed the quiet and relative privacy of being surrounded by plants.

But someone was always close by, watching her, being there for her every whim, but unable to give her what she truly wanted.

Kew pranced from bush to bush, enjoying the freedom of the outdoors, away from the disapproving gaze of others who believed dragons should be dignified at all times.

Lien glanced over her shoulder. Her servant's smile vanished and disinterest replaced it. A good reminder that at any minute Lien might round a bend in the path and meet the empress, or one of the emperor's concubines. It was inappropriate to run or frolic, inexcusable to make friends with someone of a lesser class. As a State Princess her behaviour had to be beyond reproach.

## THE ASSASSIN'S GIFT

She brushed her fingers over the leaves of a peony bush, enjoying the soft texture, before tucking her hands into the sleeves of her long gown, touching the sharp points of the daggers hidden there. She'd come here for contemplation, to centre herself before her task later that morning.

It was a huge honour to have been chosen by the emperor for such an important task. It proved he believed in Lien and trusted her completely. And finally she would come face to face with the barbarians who had killed her family. Eighteen years was a long time to wait for justice.

She moved towards the Pavilion of the Ancestors, passing by the Pavilion of Purity where several of the emperor's concubines sat having tea. Yu deliberately turned away from her. Lien ignored the pinch in her heart. In the five years since she'd defeated Yu in training in front of the emperor, Lien had been shunned in the women's quarter.

It no longer mattered. Her task today would show everyone how important she was to the emperor, would raise her status above orphan.

Afterwards she'd be invited to events, be included in palace life.

The rich red posts of the Pavilion of the Ancestors contrasted sharply with the lush greenery surrounding it. Lien paused. A palanquin sat outside surrounded by servants. Someone was already inside.

Lien needed solitude and she desperately wanted to communicate with her parents, to calm the concerns in her mind. Her cousin, First Princess Fen appeared at the doorway of the pavilion and Lien ducked behind a tree. She couldn't afford to be distracted and Fen's frivolous delight about palace gossip could take hours.

Fen walked down the pavilion steps and screeched at

one of her servants. "Where is my parasol? The sun must not touch my skin."

The servant hurried to obey and Fen slapped her. Lien winced at Fen's lack of honour. Thankfully her cousin spent most of her time learning court etiquette with the empress, whereas Lien was busy with the special role the emperor had given her. In fact her cousin, First Prince Kun was the only relative she regularly interacted with and only on the training ground. Kun had pushed her to work harder, longer, but barely acknowledged her in public, as no one could know they trained together.

After Fen left the pavilion, Lien approached, lit incense at the doorway and knelt in front of the statues representing her father, mother and brother. Kew settled by her side. Today she would avenge them. Today she would kill the man responsible for their deaths, for taking them from her when she was just five years old.

She closed her eyes, prayed for them to help her, to guide her hand and give her the strength to take his life.

Her stomach swirled with nausea, an unbecoming sensation which betrayed her twelve years of training.

But she had never killed before.

She inhaled and the strong, spicy smoke of the incense triggered a memory. Kneeling here with her parents and Bao, honouring her grandparents. It had been a hot, summer's day and the smell had drawn flies buzzing around them. Bao had killed one.

Her mother's words. "Bao! You do not get to choose when something dies. Only God has that right."

Lien opened her eyes, dread curdling in her stomach. Was the memory a message from her parents? Should she not kill the khan as the emperor had ordered?

But the emperor was God's representative on earth.

He condoned it. She glanced up, but the paintings of her grandparents no longer hung there. When had they been taken down?

Kew sent her a pulse of support, followed by the thought someone was searching for her. It must be time.

She must do as the emperor bid.

She clenched her teeth, taking another moment to visualise Bao's cheeky smile and then rose to her feet, tucking her hands into her sleeves, the cold, hard metal daggers a symbol of the strength she needed. As she exited the pavilion, her servant rejoined her at a discreet distance.

Another servant hurried towards her, dressed all in black, and bowed. "State Princess Lien, the emperor requests your presence in the Hall of Clarity."

Her heart leapt, but she simply nodded. "Of course." She followed the servant through the garden and towards the large Gates of Heavenly Virtue which separated the private quarters of the imperial palace from the public section.

Kew stayed by her side, now sedate, her head held high and her skin a bright red to match Lien's gown.

This was it. No time for doubts. This was Lien's duty, her chance to prove to the emperor she was worthy of all the hours he'd put into her training, that she was worthy of being one of his bodyguards.

The servant showed her into a private room off the main hall. His Majesty the Emperor, Son of Heaven, Zi Xue of the Bonamese sat behind a desk and beside him stood Master Ying, her mentor and the general in charge of the Office of Internal Scrutiny. Nerves fluttered in her chest as she kowtowed, her pulse thumping against the cold, polished parquet floor. It had been months since she'd been in the same room as

the emperor. His personality, his power always exuded from him, filling the whole room. She was lucky to even be in his presence.

“Stand.” The emperor’s voice was deep, the same rich tones as her father’s had been.

Lien obeyed, keeping her head lowered, not looking directly at her uncle, but her heart filled with pride and joy. He was their leader, their saviour, keeping the Bonamese safe from the Rhoran horde and protecting them, giving them the best life possible. He had taken her in after her parents’ deaths, had nurtured her and when he’d discovered her gift, he’d given her a most noble task.

His faith made her work hard to be the best. And though she rarely saw him when he visited the training grounds, Master Ying always passed on his praise to her.

The emperor couldn’t have a favourite.

Inwardly she smiled, though her expression remained impassive.

“I am pleased you are wearing the gown,” the emperor said.

She inclined her head. “You asked me to, Heavenly Majesty.”

“You have the knives?” Master Ying asked.

In response she withdrew the blades from the special inserts in her sleeves and showed them to her master.

“Good. The Rhoran are approaching the palace,” Master Ying said. “Time to get into position. You know what to do?”

“Yes, Master. Are the archers in place?”

“Of course.” His tone carried a hint of steel. She shouldn’t have questioned him.

“The khan will be at the front.” The emperor was

grim. "This must go according to plan."

"Yes, Heavenly Majesty." He must love her to allow her to avenge her parents. It had also been his brother who had died. But she had one concern. "Will his death not dishonour you for breaching the emissary treaty?"

"You will not mention I ordered this. You will respond to something that will happen inside."

Before she could ask what he meant, her master said, "Follow me." He headed towards the door and Lien followed. To ask more questions after being given an order was disrespectful. Kew moved ahead of her between Master Ying and Lien, her pace steady and alert.

They moved into the immense Hall of Clarity, its high, lofted ceilings arching above supported by majestic polished wooden columns, each intricately carved with a Kixi, the guardian of the Gates of Heaven. Government officials murmured to one another as they stood around the edges of the room, their navy-blue uniforms pressed to perfection and not a hair out of place. No hint of the archers in the room.

Lien stood at the base of the emperor's dais, below the impression of the emperor himself, the embodiment of God, the features so realistic one would believe God had turned him to wood. Only the current emperor's visage was ever displayed, only he was the hand of God. Directly in front of her, the massive double doors would soon open to admit the barbarian she had to kill.

She focused on the delicate mosaic on the polished wooden parquet floor. The perfect pattern, not a tile out of place, showed the superlative talent of Bonamese craftsmen.

Incense burned around the bottom of the dais, a musky scent filling her nose and making her eyes water.

She preferred the fresh air of the Imperial Garden, but she would never tell her uncle.

“All bow for His Majesty the Emperor, Son of Heaven, Zi Xue,” a courtier announced.

Lien kowtowed as the emperor entered the room and crossed in front of her, his own pet dragon by his side, and then moved up the stairs of the dais to his throne.

“Stand.”

As Lien obeyed the emperor, she raised her eyes briefly, a movement too quick for anyone to see. One man glanced at her, his brow furrowed in confusion. The state princess was not usually present for political matters.

They would find out why soon enough.

The emperor’s dragon slithered around the bottom of her gown, blending in with the rich red, and then pounced on Kew, ready to play. Lien’s heart caught in her throat as the two dragons rolled around on the ground snapping and growling at each other. Some officials laughed.

This was not dignified.

*Stop!*

Lien sent the visualisation to Kew and her dragon responded, climbing off the emperor’s dragon and coming to stand by her feet. The emperor clicked his fingers and a servant rushed over, kowtowing.

“Take the dragon out.”

“Yes, Your Imperial Majesty.” The servant sprang to his feet and made shooing motions with his hands to Kew.

*Go with him.*

Nothing should upset the emperor today and Lien’s task was too important for her to be distracted by Kew.

There was the occasional rustle of clothing as people

shifted, tired of waiting. The Rhoran should have been here by now and it was sacrilegious to keep the emperor waiting. They were a rude and uncouth people, but even this was far from what she'd expected. The emperor would be furious.

Then again, she was in no hurry to take a life.

Nerves skittered over her skin. Focus. Visualise. Be calm.

In her mind's eye she visualised her favourite memory. Sitting around the dining table with her family, her father at the head, his shoulders shaking as he laughed about something, and Bao's echoing raucous laugh. Her mother, ever the lady, smiling in delight, her eyes sparkling.

Warmth filled Lien.

"The Rhoran are here, Heavenly Majesty."

Lien's chest tightened as the mood in the room changed instantly. The emperor's dragon changed colour, flowing from moss green, through grey to blood red in response to the emotions of disgust, anxiety, abject fear.

Weak.

They shouldn't fear some nomadic barbarians who raided their borders if the Bonamese didn't pay them tribute. They were Bonamese, the most civilised people in the world, and the imperial palace was the centre of the universe.

But with so many weak officials, was it any wonder the Rhoran demanded whatever they wanted?

At least her uncle was doing something about it.

She lifted her gaze as the huge red, wooden doors opened and a group of ten Rhoran men entered, the man Lien assumed was their leader at the front. He was taller than the rest of the barbarians, perhaps two hand spans taller than herself, and wore his brown, shoulder-

length hair loose like a drunkard. His skin was the tanned colour of a peasant who spent his days in the sun, far darker than hers. The Rhoran weren't civilised enough to change their environment to suit them.

He wore a long-sleeved dirty yellow caftan tied with a thick unsightly sash around the waist and loose pants underneath, all made from some rough cloth. No sign on any of the men of the silk they demanded as tribute.

The party walked down the centre of the hall and stopped at the base of the dais, but did not kowtow as they should.

How insolent! Her fingers clenched inside her sleeves.

Prime Minister Cong's voice rang out. "His Majesty the Emperor, Son of Heaven, Zi Xue of the Bonamese permit me to introduce the Khan Temur, leader of the Rhoran, here to receive tribute as your vassal."

Why did the emperor insist on playing these games? The Bonamese were stronger, smarter and richer than these nomads. All their other vassals paid tribute rather than received it.

No, she should not question the emperor. He knew best, which was why she would kill the khan today and show everyone her worth.

Lien raised her eyes fractionally as the emperor's dragon slid past the khan, reflecting a dark grey. The khan was wary. It was surprising he had any inkling of the dangerous position he was in. The Rhoran weren't known for their intelligence. Lien glanced at the men behind him. The warriors were alert too, their posture stiff and hands resting where their sabres would be if they were permitted to be armed in the emperor's presence. They didn't like being here, that much was certain.

Good.

"Welcome to my home, vassal Temur," the Emperor said.

Lien focused on his words. She needed to be ready.

"We are grateful you have opted to travel the distance to receive the gifts we bestow upon you."

"The honour is ours." Temur's voice was deep, with a hint of sarcasm in it.

The nerve of him. This man had ordered the raid which had killed her parents. He had no honour, he didn't deserve to live.

"We have gathered some of our finest silk," the Emperor continued and a servant carried in a bolt of silk for the barbarians.

Temur fingered the fabric. "It is fine indeed." His Bonamese was fluent with only a hint of accent but his tone grated on Lien's nerves. How could he be so insolent in front of the emperor of the world?

"In addition to the textiles, we have silver, sheep and several cartloads of rice." Xue's tone was benevolent.

"Your generosity is magnificent," Temur replied.

No one could be rude to the emperor. Lien fingered her knives. It would be a pleasure to kill him.

But time was running out. The barbarians had refused to dine with the emperor and the Heavenly Majesty was not offering anything else. Had she missed her cue to kill him? Her throat closed over. Maybe she had ruined everything.

What would Master Ying tell her? She needed to be alert to every opportunity. Temur was only one step below her and two arm lengths away. She could be beside him before anyone blinked.

"There is one last thing," the emperor announced. "I wish to give you one of my greatest treasures."

What was he talking about? Lien wanted to look at him, but she kept her eyes lowered as expected. He

hadn't told her anything about a treasure, only what was in the tribute. Her fingers dug in to her arms where they crossed.

Relax.

"I wish to give you my niece, State Princess Lien, for your wife."

Shock speared through Lien like a lightning bolt and her head whipped up to stare at the emperor. What? He raised his eyebrow and she returned her gaze to the ground, composing her expression like the perfect woman. Every nerve in her body jumped, the hairs on her arms stood alert. Why would he do this to her?

How had she displeased him?

"You do me great honour, Emperor Xue." Temur's voice again. "Please allow her to approach so I can admire her."

The admiration in his voice crawled over her skin, but Lien relaxed, her body at once calm. How could she have been so foolish? This was the opportunity her uncle had mentioned—her chance to kill the barbarian.

"Princess Lien, you may approach the khan."

"Yes, Heavenly Majesty." She kept her voice meek as she walked towards the barbarian, her face lowered, while her fingers withdrew the knives from their pockets. She gripped them and waited for her moment.

She had to get her timing right. The archers hidden around the room needed to aim for the remaining Rhoran men. The emperor didn't want her to expose her gift by killing all the men herself even though she would be quicker than the archers.

Her pulse raced as she stopped in front of Temur. She would show these men what she could do, she would free the Bonamese from the Rhoran tyranny.

"Let me see your face." Temur raised her chin with one hand.

His touch was gentle, his fingers warm. Her skin tingled as Lien lifted her eyes, past his dark lips surrounded by laughter lines, over his crooked nose, to his brown eyes showing compassion.

Her heart jumped.

He knew she didn't want this, but he could not refuse her. To refuse a Bonamese princess would give the emperor a legitimate reason to declare war.

He was also young, far younger than she expected, perhaps only a half-score older than her. Too young to have been responsible for the attack on her parents.

Could the emperor be mistaken?

No, it wasn't possible, he was the embodiment of God, he knew everything.

She had to kill Temur, yet still she hesitated—now she was so close, her skin warm from his touch, seeing the life in his eyes, her mission became real. He was no sand-stuffed sack. He was human, just like her, and would have family to grieve for him, as she still grieved for her parents and brother. The reminder of her family strengthened her and Master Ying's instructions flooded her mind—strike fast, strike true. Lien withdrew her blades as a shout rang out behind her. She didn't turn. It was probably the general giving the archers the command to aim. She braced herself.

It had to be now. She could kill him.

Temur grabbed her arms, his eyes wide, focusing on something behind her and he swung her to the left as the most horrific pain she'd ever experienced sliced its way through her back.

Agony shot through her body, pushing thought from her mind and filling it with a pain she couldn't ignore. Lien groaned. What had happened? The world faded aside from the pulsing heat in the base of her back. Everything hurt and her legs wouldn't support

her. The knives fell from her hands, clattering to the ground. No. The barbarian would see them.

“Seize him,” the emperor’s voice rang out.

Seize who? Her mind clouded with pain and Temur’s strong grasp held her immobile. He lifted her up and passed her to one of his men. “Make sure she doesn’t bleed over the tribute.”

Bleed? She glanced back. Temur clenched his jaw, his face red, his hand going to where his sabre should have been. The rest of his men surrounded him in a protective circle, and in front of him a Bonamese official was held by two guards, a sword covered in blood on the ground.

Her blood?

The emperor’s face was stony, his eyes chips of ice. His dragon slithered over his feet radiating a colour she’d never seen.

She had failed him. Confusion, despair and pain closed in until the darkness claimed her.

~\*~

Lien woke lying face down, her face buried in soft, dusty fur. She shifted, but her limbs were tied down, splayed out from her stomach like a star. Her body tensed, the hairs on her arms standing on end.

Where was she?

Fear fought the fatigue dragging her back under and she pushed through the sludge as she mentally checked herself. Under the thick, coarse fabric covering her she was naked. Panic pushed to take control but she refused to let it.

She visualised her father’s face, his deep brown eyes, his wide smile and as her heart rate slowed, she focused on her body.

Her lower back throbbed with a piercing ache, and

she squeezed her eyes closed.

The Rhoran had come. The emperor had betrothed her to the khan so she could get close enough to kill him. And instead of succeeding, she'd been stabbed in her own home. Her skin flushed hot, tingling throughout her body.

How was it possible? Her home was her sanctuary, but it was a Bonamese official who had stabbed her.

He must have been aiming for Temur—a novice to miss so badly.

Then one of the Rhoran men had carried her away, instead of taking her to a palace healer.

Vague memories flashed through her mind of waking in pain, lying in a cart as it jolted over the ground. Searing agony as she was lifted down when they'd reached their destination.

She was in one of the Rhoran camps.

Her breath caught in her throat. She had to escape. The khan had surely noticed the knives fall from her hands and would be waiting for her to wake so he could torture her before he killed her. The barbarians were vicious with their enemies, cutting off their heads or allowing their herds to stampede over them. Her family had been fortunate their deaths were quick. They had drowned crossing a flooded river to escape the Rhoran.

She wouldn't go easily. As long as they untied her, she could defend herself, and escape. Her heartbeat slowed.

But how would she find her way back to Bonam and the imperial palace? She'd never been further than Jung Li's Dumpling House on the edge of the city. She wouldn't survive crossing the sparse steppes alone.

She opened an eye. Dark aside from the candlelight which glowed somewhere off to the side. It must be night—the best chance for her to escape.

Soft footsteps sounded behind her and an accented female voice said, “You’re awake. Don’t be afraid, you’re only tied down so you wouldn’t reopen your wound. I’ll get you something to drink.”

Lien tracked the short, stocky woman’s movements over to a low table with a bowl of liquid on top. Lien tested her restraints, they gave slightly allowing her some movement, but not enough to defend herself.

The woman brought over a ladle of the liquid, lowering it towards the bed. Lien wouldn’t drink it. It could be drugged or poisoned. “No—” She lifted her head as she spoke and pain shot through her lower back, making her dizzy. She opened her mouth, tried to scream but her mouth was too dry for sound. Before she closed it, the woman poured the liquid in.

Lien swallowed, her body demanding the fluid, and then lay down panting as the pain spread out across her back. She groaned.

“Let me get someone to check your back and take the ties off.” The woman hurried away.

Nausea swelled in Lien’s stomach, but she gritted her teeth, ignoring the dizziness. This was her chance. She tugged on the rope on her wrist, the fibre burning her skin.

A door banged and she froze.

“You’re awake.”

He spoke the Rhoran language, but Lien recognised the deep warm voice. Her skin prickled. The khan, Temur.

She said nothing. Best let him lead the conversation to discover how much he knew.

“I thought you might not wake after all this time. You’ve been very ill. The poison took time to work its way out of your system.”

Poison? She twisted her head. Temur stood just

inside her peripheral vision, his dark brown clothing making him more of a shadow than a person. He towered over her and though his arms hung loosely by his side, tension surrounded him and he exuded power in the same way Master Ying did—confident and terrifying. She froze.

“Please forgive the restraints. You thrashed about while you were healing and kept reopening the wound.” He walked around her bed and squatted in front of her, holding something up for her to see.

Her knives.

All her years in the palace women’s quarters had made Lien an expert at showing no reaction to veiled and not-so-veiled barbs, but inwardly she flinched.

“And you were going to kill me.” His eyes were hard. “Did the idea of marrying me so upset you, or was it the emperor’s plan all along?”

Her heart galloped. She would not tell him the emperor’s plans even if they tortured her.

Temur stood, lifted the bed coverings, and a cool breeze wafted over her naked body. What would he do to her? Lien struggled to free her hands, ignoring her back screaming in protest.

“Calm yourself.” He cut the ropes at one wrist and ankle, dropping the cover back in place. “I thought you might like to move around.”

She stilled. He was letting her loose?

Turning gingerly to her side to face Temur, she clutched the cover to her chest.

“I don’t believe you’ll try to escape. You’re naked—” He smiled. “—and you’ve reopened your wound with your struggling.” He went to the only door of the round tent and spoke to someone outside. Aside from the small table, there was little other furniture in the room, and only the ladle and bowl she could use as a weapon.

She rubbed her freed wrist against her side and circled her ankle as needles rushed through her skin. She gritted her teeth and reached for the restraint on her other hand. Her back spasmed, pain blooming from the stab wound and with it something warm ran over her skin. She jerked her hand back. Bleeding wasn't good. How much damage had she sustained? How had it weakened her?

Temur's eyes met hers. Lien remained still while her heart thumped as if she was in the middle of an intensive training session. The khan walked forward, jiggling her knives in his hands. Would he use them?

He passed around the end of the bed, out of her vision and she twisted, clenching her fist, ready to punch. He lifted the blankets, cut the remaining restraints and dropped the covers back in place.

She relaxed her hands.

"There are men throughout the camp. I suggest you stay where you are."

His threat wasn't subtle, not that she expected it to be. But she could protect herself against any man.

Lien sat up, wincing at the pain and wrapping the coarse sheet around herself. A different woman, taller and slimmer than the first, entered the tent carrying a basket and Temur turned to leave. "Geriel is one of our healers. She will tend to you, but if you harm her, I will kill you myself."

Lien raised an eyebrow. "You're not staying to watch?" Her tongue tripped over a few of the Rhoran words and she swallowed to get moisture back in her mouth.

"Here we give our women the privacy they deserve." He closed the door behind him.

She stared at the closed door, her mouth open. That wasn't what she'd been taught. The books Master Ying

had given her said the Rhoran treated women like possessions, selling or trading them at will. Top Bonamese scholars had written them so they couldn't be wrong.

"I understand you're frightened, but Temur is a good man. You'll be safe here." Geriel was Lien's height and around her twentieth year, only a few years younger than Lien. A simple plait tied back her long, dark hair and her dress was a surprisingly pretty blue, tied with a yellow sash and with blue pants underneath. She wore no makeup and her movements were too big to have the grace and poise of a Bonamese woman, but her eyes showed compassion.

"Lie down while I examine your wound."

Lien assessed her. Some Rhoran women rode to war with their men. Maybe Geriel wasn't a healer. Only men could hold such an esteemed position in Bonam. She could be an assassin like Lien. Slowly she lay down, facing the door.

"You've reopened the wound, but it's been healing." Geriel prodded Lien's back, holding a cloth to the wound for a minute and then putting foul-smelling ointment on it. "Sit up and I'll wrap a bandage in place so you can move around."

Moving carefully, Lien sat on the edge of the low bed, holding her hands over her breasts while Geriel wrapped the bandage around her torso. The air was warm enough for it not to be unpleasant, but at any moment someone could walk through the door.

"Temur brought you some clothes." Geriel pointed to the table where a pile of bright red clothing, the traditional dress, sash and pants of the Rhoran lay. "They're nothing like the silk gowns you're used to, but they will serve you well out here."

They wanted her to wear the rough peasant cloth?

The idea of dressing like the barbarians gave her chills and she almost refused, but the lessons of Master Ying rang in her ears. *Everything can be of use to you.*

She wouldn't get far naked. "Thank you." She stood and waited for Geriel to bring her the clothes.

Geriel frowned and then picked up the outfit. Lien stepped into the pants as the healer held them open and then raised her arms for the dress. She flinched as her back twinged, but didn't say a word.

Geriel tied the sash and then took a crude bone comb and untangled the knots in Lien's long black hair before plaiting it. Lien suppressed a shudder. She would look like a peasant. The Rhoran weren't sophisticated enough to do the beautiful, elaborate hairstyles of the Bonamese. At least it would be less cumbersome if she had to fight her way out of here.

"Sit down and I'll bring you some food." Geriel gestured to the cushions surrounding the table and left.

They would guard the door but there had to be another way out of here.

Lien strode around the yurt, running her hand over the thick felt with its wooden lattice structure underneath. It would be difficult to get through. Embroidered pictures hung at intervals, one of a group of deer and another of the steppes. The quality of the work was exquisite. Had they been part of the Bonamese tribute?

She reached up to check the initials at the bottom and her back twinged. Focus. She was injured in the enemy camp, and Temur would retaliate in some way for her assassination attempt.

Her failed attempt.

Her only excuse was the betrothal had shocked her.

If only the emperor had discussed it with her beforehand... She could visualise Master Ying shaking

his head, see his cold stare and lips pressed together at her excuses.

Had the emperor changed his mind? Maybe he'd decided a strategic marriage would be better to temper the Rhoran's actions. Or perhaps it had simply been the opportunity he'd spoken of for her to get close to the khan.

Confusion filled her.

The only thing she was sure of was that she hadn't reacted fast enough. She had been as useless as all the weak officials in the hall.

Her eyes watered and she looked up, blinking the tears back. A beam spanned the distance between the wall and the four long wooden poles supporting the circular apex of the tent—the only part of the yurt not covered by lattice. A rope attached to the fabric was tied to one of the poles. It was a space big enough for her to fit through. Escape.

She would return to the palace and find out what the emperor wanted of her.

She gripped the rope as the door opened. Dropping it again, she ran her hand over the simple carving on the pole, pretending to admire it. Temur entered, carrying a steaming bowl of something smelling meaty and delicious.

Her stomach rumbled.

She stepped back, shifting her body to the side, taking a defensive pose.

Temur paused, looking her up and down. "The clothes suit you."

Ignoring the insult, she inclined her head. "Thank you."

Temur nodded towards the table. "Please sit down and have something to eat."

Why was he being so nice? Courtesy was not part of

their natural behaviour. But she would pretend she believed he was genuine. A meal would give her strength for her journey. Lien knelt on a soft, square cushion and waited until Temur had set the bowl down and seated himself opposite her before asking, "Is it customary in the Rhoran culture for the khan to serve food to his prisoner?"

"No. But it is customary for a man to serve his bride-to-be horse-head soup."

Lien glanced down at the bowl in front of her. No horse's head floated in it.

Temur burst out laughing, his rich tone flowing over her and tugging at something in her chest.

She frowned. "I do not understand what is funny."

"I don't mean to laugh, my *bayar*, but the shock on your face was too much." He chuckled. "Taste the soup. It's delicious."

Her body tensed. He'd called her his joy. No one had called her anything but her name since her brother had died eighteen years ago. It was too... intimate. She shifted in her seat as she examined him. The lines around his eyes and mouth were more pronounced as he smiled with genuine humour.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen someone smile without restraint.

Odd.

She focused on the soup. The smell coming from the bowl was enticing, thick and meaty, but the food could be drugged.

Should she refuse to eat?

No, she had to get her strength back and hunger gnawed at her stomach.

No way to be subtle about her concerns. "Is it drugged?"

His smile vanished. "No." He took the spoon and

dipped it into the soup, eating several mouthfuls. He handed it back to her.

She hesitated. The spoon had been in his mouth, but there was no other cutlery.

Should she make a fuss?

He watched her. Testing her. Judging her.

She had to eat. Dipping the spoon into the bowl, she then took a small sip. The meaty broth slid down her throat and hit her stomach which danced in celebration. Rich, delicious. She ate more, trying to contain her eagerness.

“Slow down, you don’t want to make yourself sick. You’ve not eaten for a quarter moon.”

She froze. A quarter moon. A lot of distance could be covered in that time. How could she have so few memories of it? She rested the spoon in the bowl. “Where am I?” And where was Kew? Had her dragon been left behind?

“You’re in my camp.”

“And where is the camp?”

“On the steppes. You’re quite some way from the imperial palace. The emperor can’t reach you here.”

What was he implying? Lien ate more soup, this time chewing the tender meat chunks which melted in her mouth as she waited for him to continue.

“You will be safe here as my wife, under my protection, as long as you do nothing to harm the tribe.”

He couldn’t be serious. “You still wish to marry me after I was going to kill you?” At the palace any assassin would be killed immediately.

“An assassin wife could have its advantages,” Temur said.

So she would be a tool for him. Who did he expect her to kill—her uncle? Never.

The idea of having to stay here and live with these barbarians made her stomach curdle. Shaking her head, she asked, “What makes you believe I won’t kill you the first chance I get?”

“Two things. You would be dead before you reached the outskirts of the camp and you have nowhere else to go.”

He did not understand her abilities. She didn’t need a weapon to defend herself. “I could return to the imperial palace.” The emperor would be pleased she had succeeded in her mission without damaging his honour.

Temur raised an eyebrow at her. “Why would you want to return to the man who tried to kill you?”

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