

The Healer's Curse

The Emperor's Conspiracy

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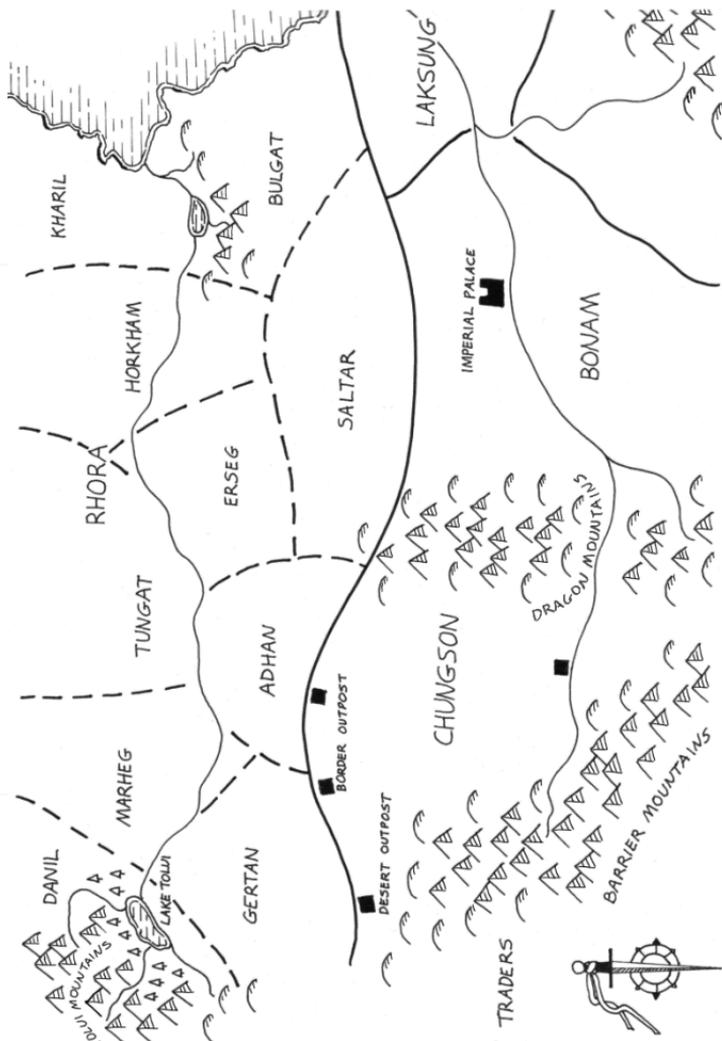
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*Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising
every time we fall.*

Confucius



Dedication

*To all doctors, nurses and other health care professionals
who work so tirelessly to care for the sick, injured and
unwell. Thank you.*

Chapter 1

Geriel wandered the well-trodden dirt between the white yurts. The evening quiet suffocated, pressing on her chest as if smothering her, and yet murmurs from inside the yurts grated like an out-of-tune morin khuur. After the excitement of the past few moons, the mundanity of camp life was stifling.

She had finished in the healing tent for the day and was in no rush to return home, where the yurt would be full of her brothers and sisters all wanting to talk. That wasn't the type of noise she wanted. Geriel missed the thunder of riding across the steppes with the Rhoran warriors, missed the sense of purpose training with Lien had given her. But there was no longer an urgent need to learn everything her adopted sister could teach them. The secret bodyguard and Lien's old assassin master were all dead.

Until only a few days ago, all ten Rhoran tribes had filled the camp with laughter and celebrations. Something was always happening, and there was always someone new to meet. But the tribes had finally gone their separate ways, taking their share of the treaty reparations with them. Geriel's tribe felt smaller now than it ever had. She knew every person in every yurt

and longed for a diversion beyond daily healer training and family chores.

Geriel wandered to the horse yard, scanning for her own brown steed, Khulan. She sighed. Perhaps she should ride across the steppes, clear her mind, stop wishing for more from life. The sun would be up for another hour at least.

“Why the big sigh, child?”

Her heart swelled with love at her father’s voice, but as she faced him, guilt swamped her. Sukh was her rock, the man who was always there for her, who gave her confidence and a sense of purpose. Geriel had failed him. She’d been unable to heal him. She’d been useless at the one thing her tribe expected of her.

He waited for her answer, his shoulder-length brown hair in need of a comb and his eyes patient.

“No reason.” She couldn’t tell him she was stifled here, that she needed to escape from the expectations of the tribe, the ones she’d already failed.

“Would you like to ride with me?”

She smiled. He read her mind. The solution to all her father’s problems was a ride on the steppes, a way of clearing his head and opening it to new possibilities and options. “Yes, please.”

As she answered, Khulan lifted her head and trotted over. Her father’s ability to communicate with horses could be useful. “I’ll get my saddle,” Geriel said.

He chuckled. “It’s right here.” He shifted and next to him on the fence were both saddles.

“You knew I would say yes.”

“I had a hunch.” He passed her the saddle and they prepared their horses.

She hadn’t ridden Khulan much since she’d returned from helping the injured Rhoran the Bonamese emperor had released as part of the peace treaty. She’d

left the difficult healing—those that required use of her gift—to Amslan and had concentrated on the normal healing processes; bandages and ointments, tinctures and tonics, with the occasional stitch thrown in. She couldn't tap into her gift with any regularity no matter how many times she practised the meditation Lien had taught her. She felt utterly useless when she failed to heal. Her gift had been discovered at sixteen, far later than usual, so she hadn't had a chance to develop it properly.

It was probably too late now.

“Come, child. Your thoughts are cloudy. Let the steppes blow them clear.”

Geriel mounted Khulan and kicked her into a canter, letting the cool wind on the steppes blow past her. She closed her eyes, trusting her horse to follow her father, and tried to release the tension, the dissatisfaction with her life.

She should be happy.

Her people had just defeated the Bonamese emperor, had stopped his invasion, had prevented him from seizing an artefact which would have destroyed them. The treaty had returned all their missing tribe members, had given them a new batch of silks, rice and other goods and had seen the dragons reclaim their rightful land in the mountains that bordered Bonam and its vassal state Chungson. It had been a rousing success.

But taking part in the attack, even on the outskirts as a healer, had opened a new world of travel and adventure to Geriel. She wanted to experience life outside her tribe, wanted to explore the world.

Her mother and the spiritual leader wanted to find her a suitable husband.

She grimaced. That's not what she wanted, not yet.

She still didn't know who she was, or what she wanted out of life. Having to consider another person would stifle her further. She was grateful the emperor invaded when he did. The Rhoran tribes had gathered for the khan's wedding, and her mother had decided it was the perfect opportunity to find Geriel a husband. But then the camp was attacked and all focus turned to defeating the emperor. Lien made certain Geriel went with the army and Geriel was so incredibly thankful for the opportunity.

Her father called out and she opened her eyes, found him circling around and slowing. She followed suit and ended up next to him, on the top of a rise, looking over the endless expanse of the grassy steppes. Before her was the way to the rest of the world; the emperor's land of Bonam, its neighbouring state, Chungson and beyond the mountains were the traders' lands and people she had yet to meet. She inhaled deeply, smelled the grass and her horse's sweat, smelled home. Summer was almost at an end.

"Will you talk to me, child? Tell me your troubles?"

Geriel closed her eyes. Normally he was the one she confided in, but how could she tell him she was dissatisfied with her life? "Why do you think I'm troubled?"

"Because you have been quiet since we returned. It was your first campaign; do the memories haunt you?"

She couldn't lie to him, even though it would be the easier option. "I was prepared for the fighting. I've healed warriors before, I knew what injuries to expect."

"Then what?"

Her throat closed. She swallowed hard. "How are you, Father? Your injury was quite severe." She winced at the phrasing. Nothing *quite* about it. He would be dead without Amslan.

“I am healthy. I’m sorry for scaring you so.”

She turned away and he touched her hand. “I am well. Don’t blame your sister for not defeating the enemy faster.”

Her eyes widened. “I don’t. Lien fought hard for us.”

“Good. Perhaps you could tell her that. She still blames herself, all these moons on.”

Lien had no reason to blame herself. Geriel nodded. “I will.”

“Did I thank you for saving my life?”

Geriel gritted her teeth. “I didn’t.” She nudged her horse with her heels to move away from him.

He followed. “Of course you did. You were the first to reach me. I felt your healing.”

She wanted to kick Khulan into a gallop and leave her father behind, but he would continue the conversation when he caught up with her. “No. I did almost nothing. Amslan was the one who healed you. I was useless.” A heavy weight pressed against her chest making it difficult to breathe.

“That’s not true,” her father growled. “Amslan said I would have died before he arrived if it wasn’t for you.”

“He was being kind.” The piercing horror of seeing the knife sticking out of her father’s chest was still sharp. The hot flush of fear.

Her father grabbed her arm. “Amslan never says things he doesn’t mean, and he definitely doesn’t pander to anyone.” He shook her arm as if trying to shake some sense into her. “If he said you saved my life, then I believe him.”

“No. Amslan saved your life, I just prolonged it long enough for him to arrive.”

“That counts, particularly to me, to your mother and your siblings. If you hadn’t, Amslan would have found

me dead.”

That wasn't the point. He didn't understand how desperately hard she'd tried to reach her gift and heal his heart, but she could only brush the power with the edges of her consciousness. Her panic had almost consumed her. It wasn't until Amslan arrived to show her what to do that she'd been any use.

“Your gift is powerful.”

Anger rose in her. “But I am useless. I can't access it when I need it, I can't control it. When it works, it's luck.”

Her father raised his eyebrows. “I didn't teach you to give up.”

Frustration welled in her and she shouted, “You don't understand. Your gift has always come easy to you.”

He laughed, a loud, raucous sound, and some of her anger eased. It was impossible to be mad around such a joyous noise.

“Child, we all struggle. My parents thought I was crazy when I first communicated with horses. No one had done it before and I made mistakes, misunderstanding what they meant. It took a long time to convince anyone I wasn't making it up.”

She frowned. “I never realised.”

“I don't like to talk about it. The tribe treated me differently and it was very lonely. It took time to earn both the horses' and the tribes' trust and to understand how my gift worked.”

“How did you?” Geriel asked.

“Trial and error. I had no one to teach me, so I tried different things, hoping one day I'd be able to prove myself. Then one of the mares went into labour and I knew she was having trouble. I heard the foal struggling and I told the man in charge of horses what to do.

After he tried everything else, he listened to me and I saved both the mother and foal. The tribe believed me after that.”

Her father had always been respected and admired for his work with horses. She couldn't imagine a time when he wasn't.

“You need to discover what works for you and your gift, but ignoring the problem is not the solution,” he said.

Shame filled her. He was right. His near death had caused her to lose focus, to indulge in self-pity. “Thank you, Father.” Now that life had returned to normal, she would take Amslan aside, ask him to help her master her gift. There would be further battles with the emperor and she wouldn't allow herself to be as useless next time.

He smiled. “You're welcome. I'm always here to help.”

“I know.” She wanted to wash away her doubt for the day. It would return, but for now she would enjoy the ride with her father. “Race you back to camp?” She didn't wait for his answer. She kicked Khulan into a gallop and grinned at her father's whoop behind her.

~*~

The next morning, Shuren's quiet chatter woke Geriel early. She opened her eyes to see her youngest sister on the other mattress playing with the wooden horse their brother had made. Pale morning light peeked through the central flap of the yurt.

Her sister, Checheg, groaned beside her. “Go play outside, Shuren. We're trying to sleep.”

“I was whispering,” Shuren yelled.

Geriel shook her head. She wouldn't get any more rest. “Let's go outside and play.” She stepped over

Checheg and pushed aside the curtain that separated their sleeping quarters from the communal quarters. Her parents' and brothers' curtains were still in place, though they would have all heard Checheg's complaint. She was used to the lack of privacy, but fondly remembered the quarter moon when she'd stayed in Lien's yurt before Lien had married and it had been just the two of them. They'd had so much space and peace. A luxury.

She changed into a dress and pants and followed Shuren outside. The cool air was fresh with the scent of grass and colour hadn't returned to the land yet. Everything was grey as the sun rose slowly in the sky. "This way." She gestured towards the horse herd. Hopefully it was far enough away from the yurts for them not to disturb anyone else.

"Checheg's so mean," Shuren said, her bottom lip sticking out.

"She goes to bed later than you, so she needs a little more sleep."

"Jochi gets to stay up later than I do."

"When you're eight, you'll get to stay up later too."

"But that's two more years!"

"It will pass quickly." A distraction would be good before Shuren got really sulky. "Look, there's Lien." Their adopted sister, and Tribal Mother stood at the edge of the camp running through her morning patterns. She moved with such grace, posture straight, her movements fluid and balance absolute. Her long black braid barely moved and her yellow belt was exactly centred around the waist of her blue dress. Geriel would never be that perfect.

"Lien!" Shuren yelled and ran to her.

Geriel winced, hoping Shuren hadn't woken those in nearby yurts. Lien finished her pattern as they

approached and bent to hug Shuren. “Little sister, you’re up early this morning.”

“That’s because Mother makes me go to bed too early.”

Lien smiled. “I’m sure she knows best.” She hugged Gerial. “Sister, how are you?”

“I’m well. I hear there’s to be a tribal council today.”

Lien nodded. “We need to discuss our trip to Chungson.”

Gerial’s heart skipped a beat. “I’d still like to go with you.” They had recently discovered Lien’s brother was still alive and hiding in Chungson. The emperor had arranged the death of his predecessor—Lien’s father—and her brother had been thought dead as well.

“I’ll discuss it with Temur and Father.”

Shuren gaped at her and tugged on her hand. “You can’t leave again. It was awful with you gone. I was so worried.”

Gerial squatted closer to her sister’s height. “This trip won’t be as dangerous as the last one. We’ll be travelling in secret, and not going anywhere near Bonam.”

“I don’t like it. I’ll tell Father not to let you.” Before Gerial could stop her, Shuren ran off.

She sighed and stood, resisting the urge to chase her. “The attack on the camp really frightened her.”

“She witnessed a lot of death and destruction,” Lien said. “I believe Father will let you go. The dragon sanctuary has a lot of rare plants in it. My father spent some time studying there before he was killed. We need to take a healer with us to discover new plants.”

Gerial’s heart leapt and danced. Her parents couldn’t refuse if it was for the good of the tribe.

“Would you like to have breakfast with us?” Lien asked as she walked back towards the yurts.

“Yes, please.” Of late the noisy dinner table at home stressed her.

They moved through the camp, greeting more early risers, until they reached the khan’s tent in the centre. Lien walked in. “Temur, we have a guest for breakfast.”

Geriel hung back until the khan said, “Who is it?” Then she stepped through the door. She’d always been a little overwhelmed by Temur, though she didn’t let it show. He was their khan of all of Rhora, not just their tribe, and was confident and assertive. He’d achieved much at such a young age.

“Geriel.” He opened his arms to welcome her. “Come in.”

She sat on one of the cushions while Lien served the food.

“Are you well?” he asked.

“Yes. Thank you.” She longed to put her case forward to accompany them to Chungson. “And you?”

He grinned, his face lighting up as he glanced at his wife. “I’ve never been better.”

His love for her sister warmed Geriel. Before they married, Lien had been worried. She was an outsider, a Bonamese princess given to the khan by the emperor who had wanted to get rid of her. Their courtship had been tumultuous, but now they were in love.

She wanted that with whomever she had to marry—hopefully in the distant future.

“I’ll stop by the healers’ tent this afternoon,” Temur said. “How are our patients?”

“Their injuries are healing.” Geriel lowered her eyes. Their souls might take longer. Some of them had been prisoners of the Bonamese for years, subjected to brutal conditions.

Temur nodded. “We’ll make the emperor pay for what he did.”

The first step was to speak to Lien's brother, Bao, the rightful heir to the Bonamese throne.

Temur handed her a bowl of soup. "Amslan tells me your gift isn't getting any stronger."

She winced and sipped the soup. Temur waited for an answer. "It came to me late, so perhaps it won't."

Temur shook his head. "Amslan believes you're blocked. We need to work on it. The conflict with the emperor has shown me we need more healers with the gift."

Geriel stared at her bowl. She wanted to improve but Amslan was right. She couldn't grasp her gift. "I will continue to try."

"I'll ask Solongo if she can help."

Geriel stifled a groan. The last time she'd seen the spiritual leader, Solongo had raised the case for her marrying soon. She would rather not remind her of that conversation.

"Geriel could come with us to Chungson," Lien said. "She would be the perfect person to study the plants in the dragon sanctuary."

Temur frowned. "Perhaps. We need to keep one gifted healer with the tribe and I wanted Amslan to join us."

Dread lodged in Geriel's stomach. She couldn't argue her case against Amslan's. Not only had he saved her father's life, but he'd also saved Lien's life several times and his own wife as well. He was so much stronger than she, and also Temur's best friend.

Lien gave her a sympathetic smile. "We'll discuss it at the tribal council."

She had no hope. The elders of the tribe would all agree to Amslan going to Chungson. She'd be stuck here, unable to properly heal anyone. Her appetite left her and she stood. "I must go. Thank you for

breakfast.”

She left the tent, despair threatening to overwhelm her again.

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