

5 The Headman’s Daughter

Before there was Lilith, there was Zaia.

But before there was Zaia, there was Tiros.

Tiros the Tyrant: the conqueror of Kamret.

A foreign warlord, Tiros had swiftly and efficiently conquered the tiny coastal village of Kamret during the prime of his life. Kamret had been a peaceful haven, valuing harmony and diplomacy above everything else. Technologically more advanced than its neighbors, the native rulers of Kamret chose to perfect its agriculture, developing the black Kamreti wine renown throughout the land, as well as plant-based medicines, both of which Kamret had exchanged with its neighbors for influence and protection. Yet, it was those virtues that were a siren call to Tiros, who came, knowing that Kamret did not have the martial capacity to defend itself.

Killing all the male Kamreti, the Tirosians (which Tiros’ men called themselves) overran Kamret with their own full-blood women and children and then repopulated fallen Kamret with half-Kamreti children, born from Kamreti women and Tirosian men. With prior and current conquests in servitude to him, Tiros made Kamret his capital, whereupon it grew into a village-state in its own right as Tiros sought respectability, hosting foreign visitors with its wealthy, albeit small, port and renown black wine, made by surviving Kamreti in service to their ruler. But even wealthy and powerful Tiros had enemies, and Tiros spent his rule defending against like-minded invaders who would conquer him, crushing any would-be traitors within Kamret who would dare overthrow him, and expanding his influence to other local village states.

While Tiros had many children (from his three Tirosian wives), most of them died in infancy and early childhood. Fortunately for him, his four surviving older children were sons exactly like him – driven and ambitious – so he sought other village-states to send his sons, either as conquerors or matrimonial consorts, to forge alliances with blood ties and to control their rivalry amongst each other. But his last child was his only girl, from his youngest wife who had died soon after the girl was born: Zaia, his favorite. As his only daughter, Zaia was protected and sheltered. Fair-haired, blue-eyed, skin the color of burnished gold, she looked like her mother, and – once she was old enough to join her father in his rare public appearances in Kamret – she served as the shining mascot of the virtue of Tiros’ rule.

It was in one of those public appearances that Rifan, the last remaining son of the deposed Kamreti headman, first saw Zaia.

Ewa, Rifan’s mother, knew she was pregnant when the invaders conquered Kamret, and as her husband’s ancestral house burned, she hid, unrecognized by the Tيروسians among the other local Kamreti women. She had mourned for her husband Adan and three sons – all barely old enough to fight – who had died defending their home from the outsiders, and she had mourned when Adan’s last son was born into hardship and servitude. Anonymity kept her safe; anonymity kept her last child Rifan alive.

But growing up, working in the stolen agricultural fields claimed as part of Tيروس’ land, Rifan chafed under the indignity of being yet another Kamreti knowledgeable in the civilizing technology of Kamret and yet forced into perpetual servitude to his barbarous Tيروسian master, who thrived and luxuriated away from the common people. Rifan would think, as he toiled under the unrelenting sun, *If Ma hadn’t told me who I am, then I wouldn’t care*. Still, he kept his mouth shut, staying true to his mother’s sacrifice of keeping him safe, for even though Rifan was full-blood Kamreti, he resembled many of mixed-blood and, thus, could pass as one.

Just like all the other days, he woke up among other men in the workers’ compound, one among many that bordered the agricultural fields, far away from the fortified and walled center of Kamret, where the Tيروسians lived. He took care of his morning personal needs without privacy and ate his simple breakfast of bread, eggs, and beer in the communal kitchen. Then, along with other workers, he reported to his assigned area in a vast vineyard, his calloused brown hands gently handling the pruning and grafts of one plant to another. He would work for hours, under the hot sun, only breaking for one brief meal in the fields, before returning to the compound at sun-down.

So he was one of the workers who stood at attention when Tيروس, giving a tour of his splendid domain to a foreign lord, arrived, and walking behind Tيروس, with her own entourage of half-Kamreti female servants, was Zaia.

Zaia, smiling.

Zaia, laughing.

Zaia, shining like the sun.

For most of his life, Rifan only felt a seething hatred for Tيروس and his Tيروسians. But on that day, he struggled to understand what he was feeling as Tيروس’ daughter passed by, and he could smell the scent of her – of ginger and honey. He dared to follow her with his dark eyes before anyone could catch him, and for the first time of his life, Rifan was glad that he was not just a mere commoner but

the hidden son of a long-dead lord. But as soon as he felt that, he felt shame, for betraying the memory of his father, his brothers, and his mother, who had recently died, her body prematurely aged and broken down after years of unrelenting, ignominious toil. *Don't be a fool, Rifan*, he thought bitterly. *Forget her.*

Suddenly, Zaia stopped, as a fit of coughing overtook her, and even Rifan started, alarmed. “My lady!” her servants cried out, but she just waved them off as she angrily covered her delicate face, which Rifan saw was turning rose-gold in embarrassment. “It’s nothing – it’s nothing! Just – just a dry throat. The air here is very dry. Come along!” she ordered, and she hurried to catch up with her father and their foreign visitors.

But, days later, everyone in Kamret would know that it was not nothing.

Sickness swept through Kamret, consuming many young Tiroasian in fever, coughing, and then, for the frail and weak, death. This boggled the Tiroasian physicians, as their medicines did nothing, but what especially frightened them was that Zaia had been the first to be sick. After two weeks of not responding to anything they did, only becoming weaker and sicker, Tiros threatened them with torture or even death if they did not find a cure. In desperation, the physicians made the unusual decision to announce publicly, that if anyone had recovered from the illness to come forward to the headman’s manor house, with the promise of a reward if Zaia recovered. But none did, rightly fearing that if they failed to cure the headman’s daughter, then they, too, would have the same fate as the physicians.

For all of Kamret saw Tiros as a tyrant, even his own Tiroasians, which was why Rifan kept saying to himself, *You are a damn fool*, as he was allowed entry into the walled center of Kamret for the first time of his life, was gawked at as he walked down a broad avenue towards the gaudily rebuilt, three-story manor house, and was escorted to the dark-paneled main hall, crowded with curious spectators. Before the man who had killed his own family, Rifan stood. But Zaia was innocent; Zaia was not this man, and for the life of him, Rifan could not get the image of her face, rose-gold in its sweet embarrassment, out of his head. So when news of Zaia’s dire condition reached him, Rifan had come forward. But standing before the cruel warrior turned aging tyrant, he thought, *This was a mistake!*

“They say your name is Rifan and that you work in my fields,” Tiros declared.

“Yes, my lord.”

“How would you know to heal my daughter when my physicians could not?” Tiros demanded.

Rifan inhaled and said, “I have noticed that it has only affected the very young or those who do not mingle much with us lowly commoners. I believe that the sick ones, including Lady Zaia, have been exposed to an illness that they’ve never had before, and because their bodies are unused to it, it has affected them more than anyone else. But individuals like you or me – those who are active outside, surrounded with all kinds of people – may have encountered illnesses like this years before, so we are unaffected when we encounter it again.”

“You have been sick like this before?”

“Yes, my lord. When I was a child.”

“Who healed you?”

“My mother, my lord.”

“Why is she not here, then?”

Rifan tried not to get angry. “Because she died of old age, my lord,” he said, which wasn’t exactly the truth, but it was close enough.

Tiros frowned, considering. “Very well,” he declared, “I will allow you to see Lady Zaia, but under heavy guard. My physicians are already with her. However, if you are lying to me, then --”

“—you will put me to death, my lord,” Rifan interjected, his voice steady. “I understand.”

Tiros, surprised by his calm, replied, “You seem very confident, Rifan.”

Rifan paused, unsure of whether Tiros’ tone was a compliment or a threat. “As you say, my lord,” he said, and he bowed.

Oh my God.

Zaia, unconscious on her bed.

Zaia, her pale arms stretched away from her.

Zaia, bleeding as two masked and gloved physicians kept open the cuts in her arms, catching the dark red liquid in beautiful, golden bowls.

What are they – what savagery is this?

Zaia, helpless as one masked and gloved physician swung a golden burning censer over her head, noxious bluish-white fumes enveloping her head.

Rifan found himself running. “Stop!” he cried out.

Three masked and gloved figures stopped and turned their heads towards him.

“You’re killing her!”

It had been a week.

The Tiroians thought he was crazy, as he drove the physicians away from Zaia’s bed, ripped up the bed sheets, and bandaged Zaia’s arms. He commanded the kitchen to find moldy bread or fruit, cut off the moldy bits, and infuse warm water with the mold pieces. He also commanded the kitchen to crush fresh oregano into an oily paste, with some water. Accepting both preparations in Zaia’s bedroom, he unbound Zaia’s arms and soaked them in the cloudy infusion. Afterwards, he daubed the paste into the cuts, forming a poultice, and wrapped her arms again. As for the censer, he disposed of the mercury and the mercury-befouled coals, cleaned the censer, and set it on a table next to Zaia’s head. Then he filled it with cedar wood and set it alight. Leaving the censer’s top open, he set upon it a small bowl of water with the oregano paste, and after a time oregano-scented steam and cedar smoke rose up. Sitting bedside, he gently fanned the steam and smoke towards Zaia’s head. Sitting bedside, he also gave her, drop by careful drop, the mold-infused water as he, in spite of himself, softly hummed a little tune that his mother used to sing when he was a sick child – like a talisman. Like a prayer.

The Tiroians thought he was crazy, as Rifan did this hour upon hour, day by day, only stopping when he entrusted a half-Kamreti servant boy to fan the censer when he couldn’t fight sleep any longer, dropping into fitful naps as he remained, sitting bedside. No Tiroian dared help, as they expected Zaia to die under this commoner’s care and didn’t want to be seen as accomplices when Tiros put Rifan to death.

It had been a week, and Rifan was asleep, dreaming.

“Why am I doing this, Ma?” he asked. He was sitting on a grassy hill that overlooked Kamret’s coast, staring at the dark blue sea glittering in the bright sunshine of his dream.

Ewa, sitting beside him, placed a calloused, brown hand on her son’s head and ruffled his long, brown-black hair, which he wore loosely tied up, but she didn’t answer.

“I’m doing everything that you taught me, Ma – everything that our people know how to do. But I don’t know why! You tell me that these foreign men arrived in Kamret long ago and taught our people wondrous, miraculous things when Grandfather was headman, but not one – not one – piece about defending ourselves – of fighting back against these invaders, not one damn thing to save us against these savages. And here I am now, saving one of them with knowledge that they don’t even believe in – why? Why am I doing this? Am I just crazy?” He turned to his mother. “I’m helping our enemy, Ma – shouldn’t you be angry at me?”

Ewa smiled and wrapped her arms around her son’s shoulders. “No, Rifan,” she said at last, “not when you love her.”

“WHAT?”

“Sir!”

Rifan woke up with a start, hearing the servant boy cry out. “What?”

“Sir – Lady Zaia’s waking up!”

Zaia stirred and opened her eyes for the first time in three weeks. Her blue eyes met Rifan’s dark, staring eyes, and she asked him, her voice barely above a whisper, “Was that you singing?”

From where he stood, Rifan could see the dark blue sea glittering in the bright sunshine, but then he turned his gaze below him. *So many*, he thought, but he still looked for one particular person, although he knew Tيروس would never allow it. For, even now, the Tyrant of Kamret still sheltered his beloved youngest daughter from as much unpleasantness as possible.

The Tيروسian official was speaking, but Rifan didn’t bother to listen. He already knew what the man was announcing: Rifan was sentenced to death by beheading; his declared motive for his so-called crime was revenge for the death of his family. As he tried to ignore the looming presence of the executioner who stood behind him on the raised platform, Rifan heard a collective gasp, and that was when he paid attention. *Ah*, he thought, *the man came to that part*.

“—for he has lain in hiding, plotting his revenge, as the last son of the vanquished Kamreti Adan. He had hoped to deceive our Lord Tيروس into accepting him into his household, in gratitude to ‘saving’ Lady Zaia from a sickness that he himself has caused and – therefore – could easily cure. But, through the wisdom of our glorious Tيروسian physicians suspecting his malicious motive, we have discovered his true identity through questioning those who would hide him —”

You mean through torturing my mother’s closest friends and my fellow workers, Rifan angrily thought. *And the wisdom of those glorious physicians – bullshit. They were afraid of being seen as incompetents and being where I am now.*

Yet, even with those thoughts storming through his mind, he kept his mouth shut. It didn’t matter. His life was forfeit the moment he was born under Tيروسian rule. With his mother, the last of his family, dead and Zaia, a woman forever beyond his reach, safe in her world, Rifan accepted his death with equanimity.

But as he stood, shackled on the execution platform, the mixed crowd before him seemed to shudder, as one clot of individuals lashed out and another one formed and rose up. He suddenly realized that those of Kamreti blood, full and mixed, outnumbered the full-blood Tيروسians four to one, and he had underestimated the Kamreti’s grief, in losing their hope and their sovereignty. The

Tirosian official beside him screeched to the executioner, “Kill him! Kill him!” but the executioner – as flaxen-haired and blue-eyed as any Tirosian – lowered his axe and said, “My name is Ord, and my grandfather died defending Kamret.”

Rifan stood, frozen in shock, as he saw the birth of the Kamreti uprising before his eyes, and the cause of that birth was him. Rifan – who had remained calm when faced with an ignoble death – suddenly realized that he had a new role in life, and that was to be Adan’s heir, to reclaim the manor house as the ancestral headman of Kamret. His people would need a leader – and that new reality terrified him.

I can’t do this, he thought, panic rising in him like poison. Who was Rifan but a common laborer, alone and orphaned in the world? But then the image of Zaia – whose face was gaunt and yet able to blush rose-gold when she had learned that he had nursed her back to health, whose eyes flashed with anger and outrage when Tiros’ physicians accused Rifan of deception and intrigue, and whose enraged cries echoed when Rifan was arrested and taken away by her own father’s guards – Zaia flashed into his terrified mind, and he thought, *I can’t do this alone*.

Suddenly, a small group of Tirosians broke through the crowd and stormed the platform, swords drawn, and Ord raised up his axe.

Oh God – no!, Rifan thought, terrified in seeing multiple murders committed before his eyes.

Then a new scream arose, as everyone – Kamreti and Tirosian alike – looked up and then recoiled. Rifan looked at what they saw, and his mother’s voice emerged from his memory.

“My mother used to say that the foreign lords who taught the Kamreti the many gifts of our village looked like men, but they were not men. They were not human at all, but like gods – so pale and tall, with feathered wings like eagles. The Kamreti could not see those wings, yet my mother could when she first saw them, when she was young. The winged GodKings. Oh – I wish I had been alive back then!”

“They never came back?” young Rifan had asked. These were stories that Ewa would tell when Rifan was sick as a child, stories to pass the time.

“They never did,” Ewa had replied with melancholy. “It almost makes me wonder if they were real at all.”

As Rifan looked upon the sudden appearance of two godlike men, standing in a space cleared out by frightened people and towering above everyone, he thought, *They are real, Ma*.

They were the pale, winged GodKings of his grandmother’s time, even though it shocked Rifan that only he could see their wings.

And they gave back Rifan’s heritage, even though he was reluctant to reclaim it.

“Rifan, this is as it should be,” the one called Baraqel once again reminded. He was the smooth-talking, emerald-eyed one, with hair so blond that it was almost white, and his wings were golden.

“Hmph,” the one called Kokabiel replied, his amber eyes narrowed. His hair was the color of smoke and ash, with wings to match, and he was often contrarian to his partner. He declared, his voice brusque, “We will be leaving soon, Rifan.”

By the time the two GodKings left, Kamret had returned to Kamreti rule, with Rifan as the restored headman. But he felt the keen trauma of a sudden bloodless coup d’etat, as he had discovered that the GodKings had returned out of pure chance, only checking on Kamret because they were nearby. Once they forced Tiros to step down and discovered that the four sons of Tiros had infiltrated and usurped village-states that the GodKings had deemed under their care, they also removed Tiros’ sons from power. Father and sons were to be taken away to Tiros’ original homeland, on the other side of the sea, thereby securing Rifan, heir of Adan, as Kamreti’s rightful headman.

But the real trauma of the reversal of fortune was with Zaia, whose father commanded, “Come here, child!”

It was the last day of the GodKings’ presence. They were in the main hall of the manor house, and Rifan sat in the ceremonial chair of the headman of Kamret. His position still felt too new, as only a week had passed when the GodKings appeared out of nowhere on his execution day.

Zaia stood before her father. Even though she still feared the mysterious GodKings, she no longer feared her father. Her eyes had become open to everything that her father had done to the Kamreti, the other non-Tirosian peoples through her corrupt brothers, and even Zaia herself, when her father allowed her to suffer under the hands of her father’s physicians, the same ones whose incompetence allowed her mother to die unnecessarily after she was born. Zaia replied, “No.”

Although stripped of power, Tiros still felt outrage. After all, Tiros’ two remaining wives had obeyed to join him, and they stood behind him, demure in their veils as married women. “I am your father! Do as I say!”

“No.”

“What – are you going to stay and marry this DOG?”

Even in his role as headman, Rifan flinched, but Zaia remained unmoved. “I will always love and honor you, Father. But I am not a child, and my place is here.”

“PAH!” The old man spat in his daughter’s face, and as Rifan rose in anger, Tiros cried out, “You ungrateful BITCH! Just like your mother! Of all the things I’ve done for you – I curse you! I curse you! May you suffer and die in pain! May you, that dog, and any half-breed you whelp go to HELL!”

Baraqel made a “tch” sound, reached over, and tapped Tiros’ shoulder, and the deposed tyrant collapsed on the floor, unconscious, as the two wives of Tiros stifled screams. “So bothersome.”

“Should’ve done that from the beginning,” Kokabiel said, “before he opened that mouth.”

“Zaia,” Rifan said, seeing Zaia wipe her face furiously with her sleeve, her calm, stone-like demeanor gone as she stepped towards her father. He started when she gave a hard kick to his fallen form, and when she reared back to do it again, Rifan pulled her away, exclaiming, “Zaia!”

She twisted towards him and buried her face into his chest, trembling.

For everything made sense now. Her father’s favorite. His only daughter. Fair-haired, blue-eyed, skin the color of burnished gold, the once shining mascot of her father’s rule, looking like her mother. Her father would touch her fair hair, kiss her closed blue eyes, and caress her burnished gold skin, which would blush rose-gold. Zaia, protected and sheltered from everyone, from everyone – except her father. Everything made sense now, and her head exploded with knowledge.

The GodKings took away Tiros and his wives, leaving Rifan and his bride in peace.

Rifan was afraid to touch her. Her scarred arms, her muscle tremors, her remembered abuse – Tiros’ harm left permanent marks on Zaia, and Rifan was afraid to touch her. He didn’t want to hurt her more than she already had been.

But Zaia would have none of that. She grabbed and clung onto her husband, like a drowning woman wanting to live. “Make me feel something else, Rifan!” she cried, her blue eyes wide and shining.

She tasted of ginger and honey and took his breath away.

Nine months later, Lilith was born.

Zaia was a wife and a mother and felt like a failure in both.

The lovely stories that she had of her childhood were gone. All that were left were nightmares, which haunted her in her sleep and left her exhausted and jittery when awake. The painful tremors,

spasms, and weakness in her muscles grew worse, instead of better, over time, and she cursed her father’s monsters, for nearly killing her in the name of curing her. She survived, but what were the consequences? Nine years after the overthrow of Tيروس, she was a woman who could barely walk and think, a woman whose very presence both Tيروسian and Kamreti resented – as a reminder of the tyranny of Tيروس. But, regarding Kamret’s future sovereignty, she was a woman who was only able to bear one child whom she could hardly take care of – a daughter, whom she and Rifan loved but whom both Kamreti and Tيروسian saw as a useless liability.

For only sons could become headmen in Kamret.

“I will change that law,” Rifan said, but Zaia chided, “Your rule is tenuous as it is, Rifan. Both Tيروسian and Kamreti traditions acknowledge the legitimate ruler as male. Remember how quick an uprising could happen?”

It was late, and all in the manor house was asleep. In the dark, they could say hard things.

“But... Zaia, you bearing a child again... it could kill you. You nearly died with Lilith.”

She shook her head, unable to respond.

“And those fools insist that if I can’t have a son with you, then I should take a second wife – as if I were TIROS!” Rifan’s dark eyes flashed with anger when he spat out the hated name.

“Those fools are the Council of Kamret. And the majority of the people.”

“They are still fools.” Rifan remained defiant. “You are Lady Zaia of Kamret, I am Lord Rifan of Kamret, and our child Lilith is my heir.”

“They will not accept this, Rifan.”

“Zaia,” he said, “I don’t care if they won’t accept it.”

She was quiet and then said, firmly, “Maybe you should.”

“What? What are you saying, Zaia?”

She paused and then continued, “I should have left – when my father and most of the Tيروسians left.”

“What foolishness –”

“No, Rifan,” she interrupted. “Listen to me. I may be confined here because of my ill health, but I’m not blind. I’m not deaf. The Kamreti will always see me as the daughter of the man who enslaved them, and the remaining Tيروسians will always see me as the woman who betrayed them. Me being your wife – I am poisoning your legacy. Staining your bloodline with Tيروسian blood.”

“Zaia –”

“You should have married a proper Kamreti woman. Not me.”

Rifan stared at her, speechless. Then he said, “But then we would never have had Lilith.”

At her daughter’s name, Zaia gave a sharp cry. She shook her head. “Our daughter – Rifan, don’t you see that she will have to bear the worst of it all?” She broke down, crying.

“Zaia,” Rifan replied, holding her, “you’re wrong... you’re wrong...”

They hadn’t noticed the tiny figure in the darkness, who had quietly opened their bedchamber door but didn’t come in, frozen by Zaia’s and Rifan’s words. Discretely, the door closed, and eight-year old Lilith, who had been frightened by a nightmare and had sought her parents for solace, leaned against the corridor wall, her heart beating too fast.

“Lilith?”

She yelped with fear, but in the low light of a handheld lamp, she saw her father and his kind, dark eyes.

Hearing her little cry, her mother called out, “Did you have a bad dream, my dear? You can stay with Mama and Papa.”

Leading her by her hand, her father brought her to her parents’ big bed, and she scrambled up and over, to the open arms of her mother, who kissed her gently on the forehead. Lilith felt her mother’s face, still damp with tears.

Her father joined them on the other side of the bed, setting down the lamp and then turning off the light. In the warm comfort of darkness, he sang a soft lullaby, and Lilith let her parents’ confusing and scary words go. Then her father kissed her on her forehead. “Sweet dreams, child,” he said and turned over to sleep.

Nestled safely between her parents, Lilith nearly missed her mother’s whispered words as she felt herself be lulled to sleep: “Forgive me, my girl.”

The next day, Zaia began to drink the black Kamreti wine at night, “to help me sleep,” she would say. It was also helping her fall farther and farther away from Rifan and Lilith, as it not only dulled the never-ending pain in her body but also the pain in her mind, leaving an emotionless, apathetic calm. Whether Zaia had intended that or not, neither Rifan nor Lilith could tell back then.

When she was old enough, after making sure no one was paying attention to her or was needing her presence, Lilith would put on servants’ clothes and slip away through an unused servants’ side entrance. It was located in a closed area of the manor house that she had discovered when she had searched for a way to leave the manor house undetected. On the cobblestone streets of Kamret,

her brown hair gathered and tied up, a cap pulled low to obscure her blue eyes, she looked like any half-Kamreti youth. As long as she looked as if she belonged there, walking with purpose and not stopping to gawk, then no one paid attention to her. In that way, she saw what she needed to see, as Rifan’s declared heir, as Zaia’s only child.

One early evening, but before the official dinner time, Lilith discretely returned home. She turned to close the door behind her.

“Lilith.”

She flinched, her hand still on the door handle. Swallowing hard, she remained silent as she calmly shut the door and turned around.

They were in a small access room, which connected to a hidden passageway of private rooms that used to be for a larger manor house staff, when Tيروس was Kamret’s headman. The door to the passage was partially open, and her father stood, palely illuminated by the passage’s half-light. He said, “You’re not in trouble.”

“I’m... not?”

He sighed. “You’re not a child,” he said, “and I know you’ve heard of what’s happening in Kamret, even within the confines of these walls. But I also know you would want to see for yourself, even though –”

“You forbade it,” Lilith said, keeping her voice as emotionless as possible, “because you say it’s dangerous for me to be on my own outside. But that’s only if they know who I am.”

“Which is why you slip away in disguise,” he said, “although it’s hardly enough.”

“No one has suspected so far, Father,” Lilith said.

“On that, you’re wrong,” he replied. “Ord recognized you almost immediately.”

Lilith frowned. *Ab*, she thought. *Of course, Ord – the head of Kamret’s watchmen.*

“Also, you have been fortunate so far. Yes, you’re not a child, but I would be irresponsible as your father if I had let you wander unprotected in the streets. When Ord recognized you, he asked me what I wished to do. I asked him to watch over you – but keep his distance.”

“Why didn’t you stop me, then?”

He sighed again. “Because you’re right. As my heir, you need to know for yourself – but if you went out as yourself, even with a simple attendant, our people would not act how they really are.” He paused. “So what did you see, Lilith?”

Lilith inhaled, and her breath shook as she exhaled. “I have seen a group of young half-Kamreti men surround and nearly kill an old Tيروسian who had accused one of them of stealing from his shop.

I have seen a Tiroasian man dragging a young half-Kamreti girl from his home for being with his son. I have seen a Tiroasian boy collapse on the street, and everyone – Kamreti and Tiroasian – ignoring him because he is just a beggar. I have seen Tiroasian loyalists insulting you, me, and Mother, and I have seen just as many Kamreti nativists do the same, saying similar insults – that Mother is an interloper, I am a half-breed Tiroasian, and you are... weak. That I be replaced... or you.” She stopped, unable to continue.

Her father nodded his head.

Lilith stared. “You’re not surprised?”

“No. I’m not.” He shook his head, “So have you not seen one good person in all of Kamret?”

Lilith frowned. “I – I don’t remember. Maybe. But the bad ones –” She paused. “They stay in my mind.”

“They stay in your mind because such good people are becoming few and far between these days,” he said, “drowned out by those you’ve heard and now seen.”

She asked, exasperated, “Why, Father? Why is that?”

Her father shook his head. “Your mother and I only want Kamret to have peace. But Tiros gave Kamret a taste of power – and even those who were oppressed by that power find power to be more seductive than peace. I wish –” he paused. He saw his daughter dressed in Kamreti servants’ garb and remembered when he was merely Tiros’ slave – and Ewa’s beloved son.

Lilith looked at her father, waiting.

He looked up, as if finding an answer. “I wish the GodKings hadn’t left.”

Seventeen-year old Lilith, who had no appetite at all, glanced up at the head of the table and saw her father take up his water glass for a sip – and nearly drop it as they all heard the scream. Shortly thereafter, one of her mother’s maidservants rushed into the dining hall, crying in hysterics, “My lord, my lord! Lady Zaia won’t wake up!”

Her father stared at the servant, as if confused by what she had just said, but then sprang up.

“Father,” Lilith began, but he barked, “Stay here!” She saw him sprint out of the dining hall, to make his way to his and Zaia’s bedchamber.

Lilith, sitting alone before the dining table set for the breakfast meal, stared at her plate, avoiding the still-shocked gaze of the maidservant and the other servant who had been attending them. *Don’t cry*, she thought. Lilith’s fists, hidden under the table and in her lap, curled so tightly that her

fangnails bit into her palms, leaving little pink crescents indented in her skin. *Don't you dare cry*, she thought fiercely. Then she pushed herself away from the table and stood up.

“My lady,” the dining attendant nervously said, “your father said to stay here.”

Lilith's eyes flashed. “I know what he said.” Ignoring their stares, she quickly made her way upstairs. From just outside her parents' bedchamber, she heard her father command, “Get the physician!” and then saw another maidservant rush out. Peering through the doorway, she saw her father sitting on the bed, embracing her mother's small and limp form, saying, “Don't do this, Zaia – don't do this to me...”

No, Lilith thought, *no, she isn't* – and she stopped her thoughts as she stifled a cry.

Hearing her, her father said, “You disobeyed me.” He gently set her mother back down and turned to the doorway. His dark eyes burned with anger and grief as they bore into Lilith's eyes, which were the same blue as her mother's.

“Is she – is –”

“Your mother is still alive,” he answered, his voice wavering. “Come here, Lilith.”

Lilith hesitated, but knowing that her mother wasn't dead, she forced herself to relax her jaw and fists. She joined her father at her mother's bedside, choosing to remain standing. Her mother was shrunken and ashen, and it pained Lilith to see her.

“Lilith –” he began, but stopped when the physician arrived.

Suddenly shy, Lilith hung back, retreating as far away as possible while still being in the same room. She observed her father and the physician examine her mother. It was odd, this feeling – knowing that, since her mother was still alive, her jagged fear had faded away and was replaced with a dull weariness. It was a familiar emotional swing between extremes that she had lived with for nine years. Was this normal, feeling everything and then nothing, as her mother often had drunk herself so much into a stupor over the years that her difficulty waking up in the morning was not only frighteningly expected, but routine? That the reason she drank was to distance herself from her and her father so that, when she died, it wouldn't hurt as much because she had mentally and emotionally left a long time ago?

Lilith was young, but she wasn't a child, and she knew what she needed to know – even though she wished she didn't.

So she was prepared to see the physician shake his head, prepared to see her father fall to his knees before her mother's side, prepared to feel nothing.

But she wasn't prepared to feel this angry.

Even though Lilith didn't attend the public court of the Council of Kamret, she heard through the manor house gossip what the Kamreti villagers had said.

Not one was Tiroisian, and they had said awful things.

“When Lady Zaia dies, we Kamreti should kick out the last of the Tiroisians – good riddance!”

“When Lady Zaia dies, Lord Rifan must remarry and have a son – a proper heir!”

“When Lady Zaia dies, Lord Rifan must remarry a full Kamreti woman, to keep the bloodline pure. Do we really want the blood of Tiros rule over us?”

“When Lady Zaia dies –”

“When Lady Zaia dies –”

“Father, are you not bothered by what they are saying?” Lilith asked, her rage barely held in check. “Are you not angered that only the Kamreti are saying these things?” She found him where he always was these days, when he wasn't obligated to sit in the headman's chair, hearing the villagers speak their grievances before the Council of Kamret. He sat, unmoving, by her mother's bedside, and his face had begun to take on an unnervingly calm appearance.

“Why would I need to spare my thoughts to them,” her father replied, “when Lady Zaia will surely recover?”

“What are you saying?” Lilith asked, surprised. “Has there been a change?”

Her father turned to her, but his eyes seemed to focus to a place beyond her, far away. “The GodKings will come. Whenever Kamret needs them, they will come.”

Lilith stared at her father. “You – not you, too!” She threw up her hands, fighting the urge to grab her father's shoulders and shake off his apathy. “First Mother running away with drink, and now you running away with these FANTASIES –”

“They are real, Lilith.”

“I know they are real!” Lilith snapped. “But they are like a storm – or an earthquake! You can't predict them, you can't rely on them!” She shook her head, “But you – YOU are the Lord of Kamret! We rely on you to do your duty, Father!”

“And what is that, Lilith?”

Lilith's face grew incredulous. “To be a LEADER!”

Her father flinched, and Lilith was saddened to see that reaction. It reminded her of that story, when he stood before his people on his execution day, and what terrified him was not death but the thought that they were looking for him to be the uprising's leader. Only the thought of her mother –

when she was only the ‘Tyrant ‘Tiros’ daughter – kept him from running away. He was lost without her then; he was lost without her now.

What are we to do? Lilith thought, afraid and angry that she was afraid, and she saw her father regain his placid visage and turn his gaze back to his wife. *What am I to do?*

Not too soon after, Rifan stopped appearing before the Council of Kamret, leaving the headman’s chair vacant. He sat vigilant before her mother’s bedside, softly singing a Kamreti lullaby that his own mother used to sing to him when he was sick. Lilith knew that story, too: when her mother was ill when she was young, she woke up, remembering that her father had sang to her as he nursed her back to health. But it was utterly useless now, merely the delusion of a man grown mad with grief. His singing and his murmurs that the GodKings would surely return and perform another miracle only confirmed the people’s belief that Rifan was incompetent as their headman.

After several days of this, Lilith attempted to appear in place of her father, even though she was reluctant to do so. She declared, “As my father’s successor, I should stand in his stead while he attends my mother.”

Miraz, the lead advisor of the Council of Kamret, stood in front of her. Behind him were the closed double doors of the main hall, and on either side of him were two guards, half-Kamreti like Miraz himself. “Our apologies, Lady Lilith,” he replied stiffly, “but we cannot allow you to enter.”

She stared at him. “Do you speak on behalf of Lords Belis, Uvilan, Arim and Erlian?” she asked, naming the other four advisors who comprised the Council of Kamret.

“I do, my lady.”

“Well then, why am I not allowed to enter, Lord Miraz?” she demanded.

He peered down at her, barely hiding his patronizing sneer. “Need we remind you, my lady,” he replied, “that as long as Lord Rifan is alive, he is Kamret’s headman, not you?”

Such a flippant response infuriated Lilith, as the Council’s beliefs – that Lord Rifan needed to be replaced as headman, yet he was still headman so Lilith could not replace him – left her powerless to do anything. She could feel Miraz’ contempt: for the fact that she was ‘Tiros’ grandchild, that she was young, that she was female. “But –” she began to protest.

“My apologies, my lady,” Miraz interrupted, not hearing her, “but I must return to my duties.” He gave a curt bow, and the guards opened the doors for him, revealing the four advisors already hearing the grievances of three villagers. Yet again, they were Kamreti, as if Tiroians had given up speaking before the Council. Miraz returned to the main hall, leaving Lilith shut out.

The next day, after the Council of Kamret rebuffed her a second time and after she checked on her parents—nothing had changed – she tried to calm herself in the privacy of her bedchamber.

“Aaaargh!” she exclaimed after a while. “I can’t stand it!” Disguising herself in servants’ garb again, she left the suffocating confines of the manor house. Knowing the terrain of Kamret better than anyone else, thanks to her father, she traveled to a place where nobody went anymore: a lonely, seaside hill, where her father’s execution platform once stood. Standing on that hill, she cried out, “My father believes in you, you damn GodKings! If you care for us at all, then DO SOMETHING!”

She stood, waiting.

She was met with silence.

After an uncomfortable amount of time, she snorted in disgust. *I’m a fool*, she thought. *A damn fool*. She turned around and began her trek back to the center of Kamret.

In her frustration, she had neglected to cover her head. She was suddenly startled by the cry, “Lady Lilith, what are you doing?” Looking around, she saw Ord, the head of Kamret’s watchmen, his disapproval obvious that she had carelessly revealed herself. Lilith frowned, seeing him as yet another constraint of the manor house, and of the Kamreti people as well, even though she knew she wasn’t being fair to her patient guardian. “I am fine. I just went for a walk – cannot the headman’s daughter go for a walk?” she said, not stopping, but she wasn’t surprised when she felt two junior watchmen follow her, becoming escorts as she returned home. She felt the hostile stares and furtive whispers of the remaining villagers who were still out, but she kept her own eyes forward, as nothing she would say would be heard.

It’s all so useless, she thought.

It was late in the evening when Lilith returned to the manor house. Foregoing the secret entryway, she marched through the main doors, waving away the attendants and servants, who were shocked at her lowly and sudden appearance. She wasn’t surprised when her father didn’t come down from his and her mother’s bedchamber to scold her, not breaking the spell that was his vigil at her mother’s side. Having no appetite whatsoever, skipping a supper in which she would have dined in silence and solitude, she returned to the confines of her own bedchamber. For a long time she lay in the dark, finding it difficult to sleep. Her thoughts spun and reeled, her heart aching with anger and sadness. A memory of her father singing her to sleep rose up in her mind and, feeling unwanted and powerless, Lilith allowed herself a moment of self-pity.

Why was I even born?

But she angrily shook her head, both shamed and disturbed by that thought, and eventually drifted into a fitful slumber.

Sometime in the night, a still-sleeping Lilith arose from her bed and began to walk. As she walked out of her bedchamber and into a dark and empty hallway, she dreamt, and in the dream she was an invisible, silent presence who wandered and witnessed and learned a new word. In a voice none in the dream could hear, Lilith spoke that new word as if struck by an epiphany – a bewildering revelation.

“Angels.”