

K.S. VILLOSO – THE WOLF OF OREN-YARO

CHAPTER ONE

THE LEGACY OF WARLORD TAL



They called me “bitch”, the she-wolf, because I murdered a man and made my husband leave the night before they crowned me.

Hurricanes destroy the villages and they call it senseless; the winter winds come and they call it cold. What else did they expect from my people, the Oren-yaro, the ambitious savages who created a war that nearly ripped Jin-Sayeng apart? I almost think that if my reign had started without bloodshed and terror, they would have been disappointed.

I did not regret killing the man. He had it coming and my father had taught me to take action before you could second-guess yourself. My father was a wise man, and if the warlords could’ve stopped arguing long enough to put their misgivings behind them, he would have made a great king.

I do regret looking at the bastard while he died. I regret watching his eyes roll backwards and the blood spread like a cobweb underneath his wilted form, leaking into the cracked cobblestone my father had paid an Osahindo builder a remarkable amount of money to install. I regret not having a sharper sword, and losing my nerve so that I didn’t strike him again and he had to die slowly. Bleeding over the jasmine bushes—that whole batch of flowers would remain pink until the end of the season—he had stared up at the trail of stars in the night sky and called for his mother. Even though he was a traitor, he didn’t deserve that pain.

I also regret not stopping my husband from walking away. I should have run after him, grovelled at his feet, begged him to reconsider. But I watched his tall, straight back grow smaller in the distance, his father’s helmet nestled under his arm, his unbound hair blowing in the wind, and did nothing. A wolf of Oren-yaro suffers in silence. A wolf of Oren-yaro does not beg.

Almost at once, the rumours spread like wildfire. They started in the great hall in the castle at Oka Shto when I arrived for my coronation, dressed in my mother’s best silk dress—all white, like a virgin on her wedding day—bedecked with pearls from Natu and gold-weave from Sutan, and no husband at my side. My son stood on the other side of the dais with his nursemaid, also in white. Between us were the two priests tasked with the ceremony—a priest of the God Akaterru, patron deity of Oren-yaro, and a priest of Kibouri, that foreign

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religion the Ikessars favoured, with their faceless Maker and enough texts to make anyone ill. They could pass for brothers, with their long faces, carp-like whiskers, and leathery skin the colour of honey.

It was clear that my husband's absence was making everyone uncomfortable. For my part, I was bored and restless, and I didn't want to wait a moment longer. I turned to the priests and opened my mouth. Before I could utter a single word, the doors creaked open.

"Crown her," one of my advisers said, breaking into the hall. His face had the paleness of a man who had looked into a mirror that morning and seen his own death. His sandals made clicking sounds on the polished earth floor. "Prince Rayyel Ikessar left last night."

You could hear the weight of the words echo against the walls. In the silence that followed, I thought I could make out the rising heartbeats of every man and woman in that room. Not a day goes by that I am not reminded of what was lost to my father's war; even bated breaths could signal the start to that old argument, that old fear that I, too, may one day plunge the land into blood and fire once more.

Eventually, the Kibouri priest cleared his throat. "We must delay until the prince can be found."

"This day was approved by our order, set in stone twenty-one years ago," the Akaterru priest replied. "It is a bad omen to change it."

"Every day is like any other," the Kibouri priest intoned. "You and your superstitions..."

My adviser stepped up the dais to face them. This did not look easy because both priests were taller than him. His mouth, which was surrounded by a beard that looked like a burnt rodent, was set in a thin line. "Warlord Lushai sent a message this morning, congratulating Jin-Sayeng's lack of a leader. He will march against us by tonight for breaking the treaty if we do not crown her."

I did not bother to pretend to be surprised. "Rayyel is hiding there, I assume," I said. It was such a bald-faced move: put me in a situation where I could not do anything *but* create trouble. Throw the wolf into a sea of sick deer—whatever will she do? Lushai once considered himself my father's friend, but daring me to make trouble in front of the warlords was one step too far. It was also presumptuous, considering the part he played in all of this.

My adviser turned to me and bobbed his head up and down, like a rooster in the grass.

I gritted my teeth. "Get that crown." I did not want to give them a reason to think I wasn't fulfilling my end of the bargain.

The Kibouri priest was closer to it. He didn't move.

"My lords," I said, looking at the warlords, the select few who were not too ill or infirm or couldn't find the right sort of excuse not to make it to the coronation. "You agreed to this alliance. You all signed on it with your own blood, drunk from the cup to mark the joining of Jin-Sayeng as one. Neither I nor Lord Rayyel have the power to stop this."

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There was a murmur of assent. A murmur, not an outcry, but I went with it. I turned to the priests. The Akaterru priest had already dropped his head, eyes downcast. The other eventually forced his knees into a bow.

They took the smaller crown. It was made of beaten gold, both yellow and white, set on a red, silken headpiece. My father had it made not long after I was born, commissioned to a famous artisan from a town in the Faor Mountains. I stared at it while the priests began their rituals, one after the other. I could have done without the Kibouri, but I didn't want to risk offending the Ikessar supporters in the crowd.

They crowned me. No spirits came to crest a halo around my brow or send a shaft of light to bless the occasion. In fact, it was cloudy, and a rumble of thunder marked the beginning of a storm. I wondered when they would discover the body, or if they already had and were just too afraid to tell me.

Even after I became Queen, the rumours continued. I was powerless to stop them. I should have been more, they said. More feminine. Subtle, the sort of woman who could hide my jibes behind a well-timed titter. I could have taken the womanly arts, learned to write poetry or brew a decent cup of tea or embroider something that didn't have my blood on it, and found better ways to better please my man. Instead, Rayyel Ikessar would rather throw away the title of Dragonlord, King of Jin-Sayeng, than stay married to me.

It changes a woman, hearing such things. Hardens your heart. Twists your mind along dark paths you have no business being on. And perhaps it wouldn't have mattered if I hadn't loved Rai, but I did. More than I understood myself. More than I cared to explain.

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I don't like to talk about the five years that followed. Too many memories to distract a woman with when there are other more pressing matters to attend to. Even now, pen in hand while I splash ink over my favourite dress, I find it difficult to recall those five long years I spent waiting for my husband while learning how to manage life as Queen. My only measurement of time in those days was my son's growth. The rest had folded together into a canopy of anger and frustration, of analyzing his actions over and over again to myself and anyone who would dare listen—vast, immeasurable time, time I can no longer bring back.

So better I move forward and start where it all truly began—to the beginning of the end, as it were.

I didn't know that in those days. As rulers went, I was young and lacked the insight to determine a doomed expedition before it began. All I knew was that after the letter from my husband came, asking me to meet with him in the city of Anzhao in the Empire of Ziri-nar-Orxiaro which lay across the sea from Jin-Sayeng, my resolve never to speak with him again

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disappeared in an instant. My advisers' voices turned to prattling, as useless to me as the sound of wind rushing through the trees. I would meet with him, I told them. I would look him in the eye and ask why he would risk the land by not allowing himself crowned and remaining silent for five years. There were other things, too, of course—things I dared not say aloud. My father used to say that a Dragonlord who wore his heart on his sleeve did not stay Dragonlord for very long.

And so I travelled from Oka Shto, the mountain castle my father built not long before I was born, to the port city of Sutan in the east, where I boarded a ship heading to Anzhao straight across. The journey itself was uneventful. Our arrival, on the other hand, was a different story altogether. It is on the morning after that I choose to relay the events, for reasons you will soon understand.

Opening my eyes in a strange room, I lay back against the silk pillows and listened to the whistling call of a bird not from Jin-Sayeng. A moment passed. I pried my hands loose from the book on my chest and rolled across the bed so I could tug at the curtains. Before I could even reach the cord, a servant rushed forward to do it for me. Light flooded the room.

I had been Queen for five years and a princess for twenty-one before that. Although I knew that the mere action of glancing at a window would produce a scattering of robes as servants rushed to be the first to do my bidding, I still attempted to wrest control of my life wherever I could. Only recently was I able to convince my council to let me eat without someone sniffing my food first.

My father had detested that sort of attention. Warlord Yeshin had grown up with less extravagance, a claim few warlords these days can make. Born the youngest son, he learned to master the sword and the horse first before he was given his first guard: a half-blind, toothless soldier who was rejected from the Baraji household for his over-fondness for coconut wine. Even after Yeshin outlived his brothers and became Warlord of Oren-yaro, he still despised the luxuries.

He didn't try to raise me that way, of course. I was his only living child, and circumstances did not allow him to let his rivals poison his children until only the best remained. So I had no less than five servants scrambling over me since the day I was born, making sure that nothing—not even a fly—could touch me. Perhaps he might have been more lenient if my mother had been alive, but she died in childbirth—that same, tired story of the ages. She had only been fifteen.

The good thing about being far away from Jin-Sayeng, in Anzhao City on the coast of Ziri-nar-Orxiaro, was that we could only afford to bring the one servant on the trip. So while she was struggling with the curtains, I got up. Her face paled. I ignored her and began to get dressed.

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“My queen!” the servant gasped in horror, contorting herself so she could reach me before I finished tying my belt.

I stared at the poor girl. One of my councillors had picked her up from a town in the island of Akki a few years ago. Traditionally, handmaids were other royals, younger daughters or cousins of the *aron dar*, offshoots of the main clans. But my father, in the days following my birth, had lost trust in the royal clans and preferred to hire servants straight from the common folk. He had not been pleased that he had to stoop to such *low measures*, as he liked to call it, but there were less chances of a poor fisherman’s daughter from Akki slipping poison in my wine before I slept. They could be paid, of course, but commoners were notoriously easy to read, and one of the first things our servants learn is that the Orenar clan can easily double any sum they are given in exchange for their loyalty.

At least, that was the official stance. The servants also learned, pretty fast, that anyone who dared betray an Oren-yaro would soon wish for a quick death. We are fair, but we are not kind. Leniency was a luxury that only a clan like the Ikessars could afford.

“How do you like the Zarojo Empire so far?” I asked.

She stopped, fingers hovering over my belt. I could see her ears turning red.

“My queen...” she stammered.

“Are those the only two words you know?”

Her mouth opened and closed. I think she could see her life flash before her eyes.

A burst of irritation ran through me. I tugged the belt away to finish tying it myself. I glanced at my boots and she tore herself across the room to fetch them.

I wondered if knowing her name would change anything. Would she answer if I asked her then? It was an easy enough question, one she needn’t have to think about. But I watched her slide the boots onto my feet and couldn’t entertain the thought any more than that. Perhaps I could bring it up with Magister Arro if he was in the mood for my questions.

I didn’t try to talk to her again, and we walked out of the hall into silence. I think she had the same idea, because she kept a respectable distance behind me, her eyes on the floor. I turned my attention to finding food. I wasn’t clear on what customs were observed out here and no one had bothered to leave me instructions. By the entrance to the guest quarters, I was able to corner one of my host’s servants and somehow—in my best Zirano, the language in that region—was able to ask her if breakfast was going to be served or if they expected me to find it myself.

She told me, with a quick bow, that it had already been; they did not wake me, assuming that the long journey from Sutan had tired me. If I would present myself to the dining hall, the kitchen staff will see to my sustenance.

I noticed that she was not as frightened of me as my own handmaid. A little intimidated, perhaps—understandable, given the authority I represented and what our

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arrival might mean—but not overly so. I noted that in Ziri-nar-Orxiaro, even the servants shaved their eyebrows thin and wore the pigment that allowed their lips to look so red and supple. This was not so in Jin-Sayeng, where the servants needed to keep their faces plain.

I turned to my servant to make this observation before reminding myself that it was a conversation that was going to lead nowhere. She continued to keep her eyes averted, her fingers laced nervously in front of her. What was it about me that she found so frightening? Arro had mentioned that she was one of my “usual” handmaids, which meant she wasn’t a new hire. Surely she would know by now that it wasn’t my habit to whip servants for no reason.

My Captain of the Guard, Nor, found us on the way to the dining hall. “My apologies, my queen,” she said, drawing her thick brows together. “I was called outside to deal with a small issue, but I left a guard in my place.”

“I didn’t see him,” I said.

She glowered. “That’s unacceptable! I will have the man sent for and punished.”

“I think we could let it go this time. No one tried to assassinate me, Nor.”

“Without discipline, our morals falter.” Nor’s expression was hard, the sort of hardness that my father approved of. The guard might be wise to never show his face again.

“Will you accompany me to breakfast?” I asked.

“Of course, my queen,” Nor said. She glanced at my servant before falling to my side. Straight as an arrow, was Nor, and dedicated to her duty like no other. She was an obvious choice when they were picking the staff to accompany me to the empire. She was also my cousin, an *aron dar* Orenar, so you would think she would have more to say to me beyond guard formations and schedules.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Nor was brought to the palace not long before my father’s death. She was the shadow of Warlord Yeshin’s own Captain of the Guard, Sahiro the Dauntless, who fought in the War of the Wolves before deciding that army life was not for him. Nor, I soon came to understand, was something of a prodigy. Only later did I learn that she was also a royal, which explained the speed with which she climbed through the ranks. At only eighteen, she was leading her own unit, overseeing palace security among the gnarly old men that were the remnants of my father’s choices.

Choosing to join the guards instead of taking a clan-honoured title or finding position in the army was seen by many as an unconventional choice. The gossip was ruthless: Nor had married another guard, so of course she only joined to be with him. He was not a royal, so her family wouldn’t have approved otherwise. I can’t count the number of times I’ve longed to find the source of such gossip and then throttle the life out of it, even with my reputation as tarnished as it was.

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We reached the dining hall. Our host must've been informed of my arrival—a fresh plate had already been set out for me. My adviser, Arro, was already tearing into a steamed rice bun while wiping his fingers on the table. He noticed me and bowed.

I settled into the most comfortable and expensive-looking stool I had ever seen in my life and allowed a servant to place my meal in front of me: the aforementioned buns, some sort of tofu pudding garnished with mint leaves, and rice balls wrapped in bamboo leaves. I was about to touch the rice balls when Nor cleared her throat. I sighed, pulling back to let my handmaid sample a bit of everything first. I had forgotten that they had waived my rights to an uninterrupted meal throughout this entire visit. It was like being a child again.

"I trust you slept well, Beloved Queen," Arro said.

"Well enough," I replied. "Someone was playing the harp long into the night—"

"I will inform the host that such activities must cease immediately."

"I was only about to say that I enjoyed it. It gave me pleasant dreams." I glanced to the side. As my handmaid was still alive, and not crumpled on the floor with foam on her lips, Nor gave a nod, allowing me to finally eat my own food. I had only eaten a small meat pie from the market the night before and all but wolfed down the rice balls. The pork stuffing had salted egg and bits of mushroom, all melded together in a sweet and savoury sauce that tasted faintly of black pepper and oysters. I didn't care what the Jin-Sayeng consensus was about Zarojo food—the elders have preached against its richness and penchant for over-spicing—I've always found it delicious.

I washed the food down with cold, melon tea before I turned back to Arro. He was chewing on his ratty moustache, a clear sign that something was bothering him. "You might as well tell me now, Magister," I said. "I'm bound to find out soon enough."

His eyes darted towards me. "I learned why we were turned away from the governor's house last night. Governor Gon Zheshan was informed of our arrival well in advance. But he will not entertain us. Prince Rayyel is lodging with him."

"*Dragonlord* Rayyel, according to him," a voice called out from the other end of the hall. "We've spoken about this, Magister Arro." A thin, pock-faced man, dressed in ornate silk robes, approached us. An official's hat was perched on his head. I recognized our host.

"Deputy Qun," I said, inclining my head towards him. "I'd rather not insult your hospitality, but that is incorrect. Lord Rayyel was never crowned."

"A technicality that Governor Zheshan has no problems overlooking," Deputy Qun said, taking a seat from across them. He bowed. "Let me tell you what I've already tried to explain to Magister Arro: Governor Zheshan is merely following a pact between Anzhao City and Shirrokaru, signed over a hundred years ago before the fracturing of the friendship between our nations. This pact obligates one to help the other should the need occur. Oren-yaro has no such pact with Anzhao City."

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“And the fact that I am Queen of Jin-Sayeng, and not just Lady of Oren-yaro, holds no meaning to this irksome man?” I bristled.

Qun looked at me with the calm expression of a man used to the babble of enraged authority. “This is not my personal opinion, Queen Talyien. I am merely detailing the truth.”

“This ancient pact,” I said. “Why has Anzhao City never stepped forward before?”

“Lord Rayyel can be very persuasive,” Qun said. “He was the one who arrived a week before you did, bearing the sealed and signed documents. Governor Zheshan could hardly refuse him, not with all of Anzhao City’s officials watching. The law, despite our individual misgivings, cannot be broken.”

“Your nation attacked ours,” I grumbled. “You think that immediately dissolves any agreements we made before that.”

“The attacks on Jin-Sayeng were unfortunate, but isolated incidents,” Qun replied without breaking a sweat. “Anzhao City shares a sea with your nation. We vehemently opposed all actions made against Jin-Sayeng and refused to lend aid to the officials who deemed the attacks necessary.”

“I find it difficult to believe that your Esteemed Emperor allowed such a display of insubordination.”

“Our nation does not work like yours, Queen Talyien,” Deputy Qun said. *Now* there was a note of distaste in his voice, but nothing more than that. “In any case, it was the Esteemed Emperor’s father who was emperor at the time. When he died, the current Esteemed Emperor called off our forces. There was no sense in invading your nation, not when we had no intention to hold it for ourselves from the very beginning.”

“I see,” I said, smiling. We had a different story in Jin-Sayeng. In Jin-Sayeng, we knew that the Oren-yaro made a last stand in the plains between the cities of Bara and Darusu. No one else dared meet the Zarojo army the way the Oren-yaro did, prepared to sacrifice our lives while we took down our enemies—from the royal clans of Orenar, Yare, Tasho, and Nee, among others, the minor clans, and down to the last, common soldier. We fought like warriors, like cornered wolves, like demons, and forced the Zarojo to flee back to their ships and across the sea.

Qun did not know that, else he would not continue to look at me as brazenly as he did. I allowed it to slide; he was still our host, after all, and I still had my manners. I took a sip of melon tea to quell my nerves. “Please accept my gratitude, then, that the Jinsein people can call the people of Anzhao City *friend*.”

“I would not go that far,” Qun said, nodding towards me. “But your candour is appreciated.” A smile worked its way up to the corners of his lips. “As is my head.”

*So, I thought. My reputation precedes me.* Outwardly, I only smiled some more. “If you continue to serve these rice balls for breakfast, you may keep it.” Let him think we had an



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understanding. My father had taught me, early on, to detect ambition, and it was clear from the gleam in the man's eyes that he only offered his hospitality because he saw it as a chance to undermine Governor Zheshan's authority.

Or so I imagined; I had only been Queen for five years, and the feeling of being thrown into an ocean I couldn't swim in prevailed. Before I could get the chance to be smug about this, Arro bent forward, his skin folds jiggling. "Don't try to fool us with your prattle, *deputy*," he said. "You could at least honour our request to gain a private audience with the governor. That you would imply that the Queen of Jin-Sayeng must *beg* to be allowed to speak to a mere governor..."

"I am only doing my job, Magister Arro." Deputy Qun gestured at the food before us. "If the hospitality is not to your liking, I can recommend several excellent inns in the area. Until then, my abode is yours." He bowed before shuffling out of the hall.

"This is intolerable," Arro said through gritted teeth. "The insolence they offer Jin-Sayeng..."

"What would you have me do, Magister?" I replied, keeping my voice low. "Declare war on them? Bite them?"

Arro snorted. "Would that you could."

"I cannot even get my lords to agree to a single law without at least a year of deliberation and arguments." I plucked a mint leaf before pushing the pudding away. "I knew Rai must be out of his mind to suggest this meeting *here*, out of all places. The Kag would've made more sense—at least we wouldn't have to brave a week's journey on sea to get there. I didn't realize it was this bad. He's dragging the Zarojo into our business. Whatever he wants to discuss will have this Governor Zheshan's scent all over."

"The Ikessars have always been sneaky."

"I must agree with you on that. But why on earth have you never alerted me about this pact?"

"I didn't think they would actually uphold it," Arro grumbled.

"Does Oren-yaro not have a similar pact elsewhere?"

Arro nodded. "We do, though it is certainly nowhere near as *ancient* as the one Shirrokaru. My understanding is that ours is fairly recent. It's with a place called Zorheng City, some distance north of Anzhao."

"Then we should travel there for assistance. Perhaps we can delay this meeting and approach it from a better position. I dislike the idea of walking straight into a trap."

Arro grimaced. "I'm not sure if that's wise, Beloved Queen."

"And why not?"

He hesitated for a moment. When he finally answered, his voice was subdued. "In the first place, it is at least three days' journey from here and we are already lacking in resources

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as it is. Secondly, it is currently under the rule of Governor Ong, whose eldest daughter is married to Prince Yuebek Tsaito, Fifth Son of Emperor Yunan.”

“A prince? That sounds even better.”

“No,” Arro said, pushing away from the table. He gave me a stern look. “It is *not* better. I should warn you now, my queen. Prince Yuebek has...a reputation.”

“So do I. Royalty must stick together.”

“He...” Arro glanced behind him, noticing that Qun’s servants were standing right by the door.

I understood what he meant. “And how does it feel to finally return to the land of your birth, Magister Arro? A half-Zarojo such as yourself would surely have strong feelings about this.”

He dabbed a handkerchief over his lips. “We will speak of this at another time, Beloved Queen.”

“No, really, Arro. I wouldn’t mind talking about it.”

“As I said.” He looked down at his plate and returned to his meal.

The silence seemed louder this time, a sharp contrast to the chatter from only a few moments ago. Even Nor seemed more entranced by the idea of food than small talk. Other than Qun’s quiet servants and my handmaiden in the far corner, it was just the three of us in the vastness of that dining hall. I couldn’t see why we couldn’t take this opportunity to become better acquainted with each other—Akaterru knows, we’d been working together long enough. You think the exchange of a few pleasantries would be in order. How did I get it into my head that conversation would come easier once we reached the empire? Both had been just as subdued in the small confines of the ship that brought us here. I had chalked it up to nervousness, especially with the journey and the ship’s crew capturing most of their attention, but it was clear that there was more to it than that. They were servants, not friends. The new scenery did not change that.

I ate the last of my rice balls and pushed myself away from the table. Almost immediately, Nor got up to walk me to the hall.

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I’ve never known a life outside of politics.

I *have* been told that monarchs can have hobbies. The last true Dragonlord, Reshiro, kept butterflies. But then again, he was an Ikessar, and only Ikessars would find interest in that sort of thing.

Deputy Qun’s gardens were better kept than the one in my palace. There were long rows of cherry trees imported from Dageis. Despite the time of the year, they were dressed

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in pink and white blossoms. A small gust was enough to send a flurry cascading around us like snowfall. I quite liked the effect, but I wasn't sure if I had the patience to create such an addition for Oka Shto. "Leave the gardening to the Ikessars," I liked to tell the warlords when they comment on the wild nature of the surrounding land. "We Oren-yaro have better things to do."

The abandoned keep down at Old Oren-yaro didn't even have a garden. The Oren-yaro tended to prefer utility and function over aesthetics, and the old keep was nothing more than an outcrop of buildings and warehouses and a temple behind walls. My father only had the garden in Oka Shto built after extreme pressure by his advisers, who told him he needed a more presentable image if his claim to the throne would be recognized. There was more to being a leader than cutting down enemies: if one wanted to challenge the Ikessars, one needed to show the people that one could be cultured, elegant, and sophisticated. So he had the garden built, with a giant fishpond in the middle and jasmine, hibiscus, and frangipani flowers everywhere—local Jin-Sayeng fauna, nothing imported. He liked the scent of jasmine, he told me once—it reminded him of his mother.

But that was it. After Rai's departure, I allowed the garden to become overgrown, and by now all the fish have probably eaten each other. I could be harbouring crocodiles now, for all I knew. The reality of ruling is complex, made even more so when you have a nation like mine, with empty coffers and people who hated each other behind polite words and empty smiles.

"How rich is this empire, really?" I asked, flicking a petal off my shoulder.

Nor looked up. "You were asking me, Beloved Queen?"

"You're the only one within earshot." This time, I couldn't mask the irritation in my voice.

She seemed completely unaffected by my candour. "I have not had the chance to educate myself on the numbers..." she began.

I gestured at the garden. "I was not asking for the exact figure. It's just that if a mere *deputy*—an elected government official, yes?—can afford all of this, while my father had to run himself bankrupt to get our garden built..."

I deliberately trailed off to let her pick up the slack. But she didn't respond, her thick eyebrows drawn together in what appeared to be a permanent furrow.

"I would appreciate your thoughts on this," I urged.

Her jaw slackened. "My Beloved Queen is wise. You will best know the answer to your question."

"But your opinion..."

"Shall I call Magister Arro? He is best qualified to advise you."

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“I think I can guess at what he’d say,” I said. And then, because I was my father’s daughter, I tried again. “How did your husband react to news of this trip?”

“Beloved Queen, it is my duty to go where the Dragonthrone demands it. Do you have any particular concerns I can address?”

“No matter.” I saw her shoulders drop as she visibly relaxed. I wondered what it was about my questions that made them difficult to answer. I wasn’t looking for an enlightening conversation—a mere acknowledgement would’ve sufficed.

I wondered if it was me.

Rai once told me—during an argument, I think, though I can’t quite recall the details—that I was too blunt. Which was an amazing observation, really, coming from the man who rewrote the rules on bluntness. The systematic breaking down of people’s temperaments and how they could be used was one of the few traits Rai and I had in common. As I was born Princess, and last heir of the Orenar clan, so was he Prince and heir of the Ikessars. Together, we tried to navigate the social awkwardness of our positions, of the customs and behaviours of the people around us. He was a scholar and always considered himself a little better than me, having studied many books on the subject; for my part, I thought he was severely delusional. If people found me blunt, then Rayyel aren dar Ikessar was an Akaterru-damned brick wall.

But not long after, I found myself echoing his words to a friend. I asked him how I could make myself less abrasive. “Speak your thoughts less often,” he had suggested. Easier said than done, I told him. If I didn’t speak my thoughts at all, what was there to say?

“Nice weather,” I blurted out.

Nor looked at me, and then up at the sky. “Grey,” she finally commented. “Best go inside before it begins to rain, my queen.”

I had no desire to get wet and grudgingly agreed with her. Back through the arches and past the rosebushes, we reached the doorway. One of Deputy Qun’s servants took my boots. Despite their insistence, Nor didn’t relinquish hers, and they quickly left it at that; I had the impression that they had tried before. I suppose it was difficult to convince a soldier to wear silken slippers, even if she did track mud everywhere.

“Which reminds me, Captain,” I said. “My handmaid—what’s her name?”

“Has she done something wrong, Beloved Queen?”

“No—nothing like that,” I said. “I just thought, since there’s only so few of us in a strange nation, that I might as well get to know everyone.”

She blanched. “All the guards, too?”

I resisted the urge to sigh out loud. “Start with the handmaid. She’s been under my employ for several years now, hasn’t she? She usually brought my meals.”

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“Kora, Beloved Queen. *Aset gar* Angjar. Priest caste. I believe she was deemed the safest candidate for this trip. I can request a report on her background and have it sent to you if you wish, though it might have to wait until we get home.”

“I...that won’t be necessary, Captain.” I stopped in front of the door. “I desire a quiet nap before our meeting with Lord Rayyel. If you could just stand outside the door—I will call if anything tries to kill me.” I smiled.

She found nothing amusing about my words. “The guard I had assigned to you early this morning is still missing. I’m hoping he simply couldn’t face the shame and decided to flee, but it still concerns me. Be on guard, Beloved Queen.”

“When am I never?” I slid the door to her frowning face.

“Please do not lock it,” I heard her grumble from the other side, just as I was about to lift the bar.

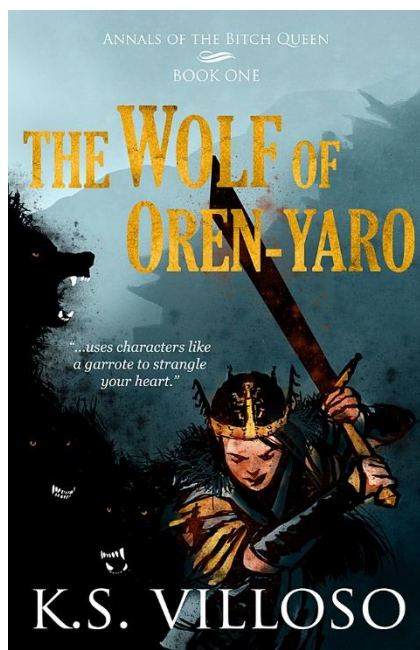
I left the door unlocked, sat on the edge of the bed, and looked through the window. Out on the grounds, I spotted the twenty members of the Queen’s Guard—minus the one—busy with their daily exercise. The light drizzle cloaked their sinewy forms and flattened the fur on the wolf headdress that marked the Oren-yaro soldier’s garb. Their faces were blank, determined. I doubted that expression would go away even if you threw them naked into freezing snow.

Unflinching, dutiful, and loyal to a fault—these tenets are why the rest of Jin-Sayeng have labelled our people *wolves of Oren-yaro*, a term that started as an insult: these wolves, they like to say, these bloodthirsty beasts, these savages who will stop at nothing to fulfill their deemed purpose. But far from taking offense, we decided to embrace the title, bestowing the name “wolf of Oren-yaro” to those who are under the rule of the Warlord of Oren-yaro City. As a people, we all embrace these tenets, regardless of clan, regardless of caste, setting us apart from the rest of Jin-Sayeng who prefer to keep their ideals within their families or clan. It has created a unity never before seen in these lands. We know it. The others know it. It is why the Oren-yaro is as feared as it is revered; the strength of our resolution has toppled realms.

Let me tell you a story. A long time ago, five hundred and twenty-six wolves of Oren-yaro died protecting Shirrokaru, the Jin-Sayeng capital and Ikessar stronghold, from warlords who rebelled. The rebels numbered over three thousand in number. By the end of the assault, all lay dead except for one: Warlord Tal aren dar Orenar. He stood in the middle of that battlefield, covered in the blood of friend, family, and foe, and held his position for over two days in case the enemy dared to return. When the Ikessar lord came to view the slaughter, Warlord Tal was still able to throw his sword aside and bend his knee before he died.

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I had no intention of bending my knee that day. But I thought of Warlord Tal, for whom I was named after, as I watched my soldiers out in the courtyard. I watched them go through the motions, their voices drowned by the torrent of rainfall, and thought that if Warlord Tal could do it—if he could fight a battle in the face of defeat and then stand strong between those corpses for the sake of never giving up his post—then I could do my part. I could learn to swallow the silence and face my husband again.



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