

K.S. VILLOSO - SAPPHIRE'S FLIGHT

PROLOGUE

Tiora's brother returned to Gentigen on the nine hundredth and fiftieth day after he had left to study the *agan* arts in Dageis under the tutelage of the most learned mages of Eheldeth in the Dageian Plateau.

He arrived on the last trading ship for that season. It was a premature homecoming—Tiora had been counting the days, but she knew his studies were supposed to take years, and the unexpected sight of him crossing the plank to the docks with fire burning in his eyes unsettled her. She almost didn't believe it was him at first.

But Tiora had known her brother from the moment he was born, would know him anywhere from a distance, in dream or in sleep. She held her breath for a moment and came to the conclusion that he was probably on a winter break and had come to surprise them. Tightening her cloak, she left the vendor she had been haggling with and crossed the street to meet him.

"Ja," she said, when she got close enough for him to hear. Her voice was lost in the crowd. "Jaeth!" she called again.

Jaeth turned. For a moment, there was no recognition on his face. His dark eyes glowered as the sun cast shadows on his tawny skin, which seemed to look more sunburnt than usual. And then he smiled. "Sister." He reached for her. His hands were bandaged and there were bruises on his face.

Tiora allowed him to wrap his arms around her before wagging a finger at him. "Why are you home so early? Did you get into trouble? You were chasing Dageian skirts again, weren't you? If Liraine finds out, you won't hear the end of it. And what would Father think?"

Jaeth drew back from her. "Don't tell them I'm here. Not yet."

The sound of his voice took Tiora aback. Jaeth had always been a cheerful boy—nonchalant to the point of foolhardiness, even. To hear such gravity in his usual, smooth voice was frightening. "Why?" she asked, trying to keep her own voice light.

"Just—don't." He took a breath so deep it seemed to rattle his bones. "I will be at Jor's tonight. He knows I was headed back."

"You're not coming home?"

"Eventually. I need time." He pulled away from her until they were an arm's-length from each other, although he still held her hands in his. "You look well, sister," he said, letting his fingers lace through hers. "Has Ossai come to court you at last?"

"Don't change the subject!" She jerked her hands back to her sides and gave his face a closer look. There were deep lines under his eyes and along his cheeks, lines that didn't use

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to exist before. "What happened to you back there? You can tell me, Ja, and if you don't want Father to know, I'll keep my mouth shut. You know I can keep a secret."

"I know," Jaeth murmured. "That's what worries me."

She closed her eyes, trying to hold back her temper. "All right," she said, at last. "Jor's, then. Do you want me to walk with you?"

"I'd rather walk alone."

"Ja..."

"Please, Tiora. You do not understand what the mere sight of you is doing to me. You, Father, all that is good and true at home...I cannot bear it." He kissed her on the cheek. "Tomorrow, perhaps. Yes, visit me tomorrow. Bring me those wrap-cakes you make so well."

"Wrap-cakes," she snorted. "I don't see you for nearly three years and you want wrap-cakes." She sighed. "So be it. I'll bring them tomorrow. I hope you choke on them."

He smiled before he walked away.

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Tiora made the cakes all night, layering each fold with slices of sugar-covered fruit before dousing them with caramel sauce and almond slivers. The servants helped her, but didn't ask for whom they were for; she hinted that they were maybe for Ossai. Their father dropped by the kitchen to steal one, but if he suspected anything he didn't say it out loud. He just stood by the window while licking his fingers, the impish look on his face quite unlike the imposing one he wore as High King Elian of Gorent. When he tried to ask for more, Tiora threatened him with the rolling pin.

She left before the break of dawn with the cakes in a covered basket. Jor's house was by the foot of a hill half an hour's walk south of Gentigen. She took her time, enjoying the sound of the waves as they crashed on the black cliffs below her. She hoped Jaeth would get enough sleep and be less short-tempered when she spoke to him.

The house was silent when she arrived, which was strange because Jor usually kept dogs and they would bark long before guests ever got past the garden gates. She pounded at the door several times before she found the courage to turn the handle. Cold darkness greeted her. She knew, even before she stepped foot inside, that there was nobody there. She ventured forward, hoping to prove herself wrong. One room was locked; she pressed her ear against the door and didn't hear a soul.

She returned to tell her father everything. King Elian's eyes hardened at her story and without another word sent his men out to scour the city and ride through the countryside. No ship had left the docks since yesterday and no travellers were seen heading out. Jaeth was gone. The men were skeptical. Was she not mistaken? Tiora was close to her brother—

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he had been hopelessly attached to her skirts when he was younger—and she had been missing him so much. With news of the war between Dageis and Gaspar, perhaps it was only natural that she thought...

But her father believed her. He returned to Jor's house with her and went up the stairs, tearing the locked bedroom door open. He uttered a strangled cry, blocking her with his arm before she could run in herself. The walls and floor were covered in black sludge. In the middle of it all was a body, half-decayed. The floor underneath started to collapse. She realized, just as the corpse came crashing to the floor below, that it carried Jor's face.

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Days turned into weeks. A letter from the Plateau came, confirming Jaeth's withdrawal from his studies. He had, in fact, left a year and a half ago, and due to the nature of his departure, which remained undisclosed, was barred from ever returning. Elian folded the letter after reading it and stared at the flickering candle beside him. "Leave me," he murmured, when he realized that Tiora was still standing there.

"Father..."

"I said leave!" She dropped her head back and closed the door. As soon as the latch clicked, she heard a low moan, and realized her father—the strong, silent, ever-watchful High King of Gorent—was weeping.

It was the first letter. It was not the last. A few more weeks came by, and then one of her father's men, a short, burly soldier named Sorka, who had gone to Dageis in search of her brother, returned with grim news. "He was last seen in Drusgaya," he said, "trying to peddle dark magics to the Dageian Emperor."

"By Ab's teeth, I hope Cerknar had enough sense to send him packing," Elian grumbled.

Sorka dropped his eyes. "He did. That's not the problem."

"What is?" There was a brief silence. Elian got up from his chair and threw a goblet in frustration. It clattered against the wall, the sound of metal on stone. "What did that wretched boy do, now? Tell me, Sorka, or so Ab help me, I'll strip you off your rank and give your goats to the dock-workers to feast on!"

"Cerknar had sense," Sorka intoned. "But his son didn't. Somehow, Jaeth got word to Prince Ralius and secure a meeting. He...the boy is dead, my lord. Ralius is. They think Jaeth did it."

"Oh, Ab," Elian groaned, in a voice that made Tiora think she heard his heart break.

Is that why you came home? Because you killed a prince? She withdrew from their presence, wondering what was worse—that a foreign kingdom would accuse her brother of

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such a thing, or that she, his sister, who loved him more than anything else in the world, believed them.

She consulted with the servants and made arrangements to leave in secret. She needed to find her brother, to understand why he had done these things. They did not save that money for his education just so he could play around like a fool. If their mother could see this now, why...ah, but Tiora wished with all her heart that she wouldn't. She might rise from the grave just to yell at them, and as much as Tiora missed her mother that was something she didn't think she'd ever want to see.

The severity of Jaeth's actions did not occur to her until the third letter came. Up until then, she had been brooding over what a disappointment he had been and why he couldn't even think of sending word to his sister so she wouldn't worry so much at least. The third letter came from one of their sea-captains, out on his regular patrols along the coasts. It said, in letters that read like they were etched in blood, *The Dageians are coming*.

Elian's eyes hardened. He crumpled the letter and threw it into the fire. He turned to Tiora.

"Your brother," he said, "just brought war to our doorstep." He said it matter-of-factly, like he was announcing the weather. He had been expecting this.

Tiora swallowed. She understood; peace with the Dageians, at best, had been tumultuous. The kingdom had been expanding its borders for centuries and it was only out of fear of Gorent's own *shiar* that it had honoured their trade agreements and kept clear of their waters so far. Or at least that was what they believed. Now, it was clear that Dageis had been acting the part of a lion playing with a mouse. To declare war without a single word when they were already at war against Gaspar...

"We could ask Hafod for help," she said. "They'll come. Baidh, too."

"Baidh? What can they do? Set their sheep against the Dageians? As for Hafod, I'd give half of the kingdom to see the day Karthos raises an army for my sake, never mind in the time it takes for those ships to get to our shores. No, my love. I do not think the Dageians are here to talk. I will have to fight."

Tiora bent over his seat. "Alone, Father? I can fight, too. Most of your men don't know half as much about the *agan* as I do. I could burn the first ship that lands ashore."

"I know," Elian said. He looked at her with an odd expression.

"What is it, Father?"

"I should've sent you to the Plateau. Not him."

"He's your heir."

Elian's jaw tightened. "You're my eldest. I should've consulted with the elders and changed the law. I could have. I wanted to. The day you were born was the happiest day of my life. But they advised me to stick with tradition, to enjoy raising my daughter and wait

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for a son." He dropped his head. As she bent over to embrace it, her chin on his thick, black curls, he glanced up at her and murmured, "Could you ever forgive me for that?"

"There is nothing to forgive, Father," she said. "Remember that we love Jaeth, too."

"He should be here now, facing this with me." Elian shook his head. "I need you to guide the civilians to hide in the islands. Disappear in the mountain villages. If the worst happens and we lose the headlands, I will meet you in Sen'senal."

Tiora took a deep breath. "I don't want to leave you, Father."

"I can trust no one else with this task. One way or another, our people must survive this."

"I know." She sighed and bent down to kiss his forehead. "If Mother were here..."

"She would've brought Jaeth home, talked to Cerknar, negotiated a treaty, turned those ships around, and still have dinner ready before sundown." He gave a crooked smile. "Make haste in your preparations. I want you all out of here before daybreak."

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*Hundreds of years later, a little girl stops reading. Her fingers graze the edge of the page, but she does not turn it.*

*"Why stop now?" her father asks.*

*"I know how it ends," she says. "This way, I can pretend it has a different ending."*

*There is an amused look on her father's face, the sort he gets when she is suddenly beyond his comprehension. "That makes no sense. Even if you do that, it doesn't change the past. Elian, High King of Gorent, was slaughtered at the hands of the Daegians. The Gorenten Headland was lost, the people dispersed into villages in the wilds. It is the same story, every time. You know this...you've read enough of them."*

*"But what if we change the rest of it?"*

*"What do you mean?"*

*"It ends at Chapter Ten. The king dies, the princess escapes, the prince is never found again, they lose their kingdom. But what if there is a Chapter Eleven?"*

*Her father pauses before giving that same, crooked smile, reminiscent of Elian's; they have the same mouth, though he doesn't know it, and the memory flickers from her before she can grasp what it means. "I knew someone who said the same thing, once," he murmurs. "The exact same thing."*

*"What happened to him?"*

*"He..." Her father's face tightens. She senses all the words he wants to say and cannot. "Go to sleep," he says at last. "It is late."*

*She closes the book with those last, unread pages, pulls her father's arm around her, and drifts off into the night.*

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