

Chapter 4

"I've never seen such a carefree look on your face before, General," said Owando as they rode along the old dirt path. Their horses were sturdy Catrias bred for durability rather than cavalry charges. Owando, having grown up with horses, suggested them to Yumanar when the two left the military encampment over a week ago. The young soldier watched the steeds closely to make certain they proved worthy of this judgment. So far, these few days into their journey, the beasts seemed to be able to churn out mile after mile with little complaint.

"You cannot be fooled by what this appears to be, General. My father and uncle hope to distract you with this quest, they certainly do not mean for you find the Spear and become dictator of Caparal. I'm certain that I'll get a message from one of them soon enough telling me how to sabotage your progress, possible even telling me to murder you. I'll get a private note at some inn along the trail or a traveler will ask to share our campsite and pass me a message. Trust me, General, I'm quite familiar with how my family operates."

"And would you betray the family that raised you in order to support me? Though we've only known each other a few months?"

Owando looked down at the ground and smiled. "I do not say that I won't murder you, or that I will fail to aid my family, I merely suggest that I will be asked to do so. Do not trust me, do not trust anyone for that matter. The power of the senators, the praetors is far too great. You have no idea what they can do, what they are willing to do to keep that control."

"Yet despite all these dangers I find that I am quite content. The war which I've fought for two long years is largely won," said Yumanar with a shake of his head and though he tried, he could not keep the smile from his face. "What concern do I present to the government now? I'd happily return to my wife, my children, and forget politics once and forever."

"You may mean that, General," said Owando with a grin on his face that showed pure bliss, "but my father and my uncle certainly will not believe it and, to be honest, I'm not sure that I do either, begging your pardon. How is it that you know so many rumors about the location of the Spear of the Hunt if you are not interested in becoming dictator? If you don't mind me asking."

Yumanar smiled, "Firstly, you don't have to call me general anymore. I've resigned my commission as ordered by the Senate."

"I'll try, Gen ... Yumanar," said Owando with a grin as he shook his head. "I've only been a soldier for a few months, as you say, but the habit of address towards superior officers was drilled into me most forcefully."

"There, you've already succeed once. That is always the beginning of any difficult task. Too often we try to change our lives all at once when in actuality it is a matter of a single instance, repeated again and again until it is a way of being. Those who attempt to move a mountain will always fail. Those who start

by lifting a single rock eventually succeed. Now, as to why I know so much about the Spear of the Hunt. I'll be honest with you, my young friend. Do you know where I grew up?"

Owando shook his head and looked over to Yumanar with narrowed eyes, "Not completely, but there are rumors. My father said you were low-born from an unimportant family."

"You are kind to hold your thoughts in check. Low-born is one way to put it," said Yumanar with a laugh that echoed through the little valley they traversed like the call of a Bellbird. "My mother was a camp whore and my father could have been one of any of a dozen soldiers."

Owando looked at the general with wide eyes, "It appears that rumors are not always vicious lies. Yet you managed to become general of the armies and lead us to a great victory, to save the republic. Is that not a true indication of the power of our nation? A testament to a free people where men are allowed to achieve their destiny despite any handicap of birth?"

"If it were my achievements that propelled me, perhaps what you say would be true," said Yumanar with a laugh and a wide smile that seemed to smooth rather than wrinkle his face. "It is my face that is most responsible for my current position."

"Your face?" asked Owando shaking his head. "That cannot be."

Yumanar suddenly lifted his head and looked off into the distance as his eyes seemed to stare at nothing, "I was fifteen, about the age you are now, even then a soldier. I was garrisoned in the northern realms below the Toxic Mountains when a praetor came to inspect us, he was an important man. He came with his children. I was an aide to a captain and invited to dine in the commander's tent during the visit. It was not an uncommon thing, designed to introduce promising young soldiers to powerful politicians. Not that I knew I was promising, of course. That is when this face upon which you gaze caught the attention of the praetor's daughter."

"Your wife," said Owando. "She is from the Gellanda family. They are considered the second most prominent in all of Caparal. They are certainly rivals to my own family."

"Indeed," said Yumanar with a shrug of his shoulders and an impish little grin as he turned to the boy. "She was a young girl of ten at the time, impressionable as girls can be, she found me handsome. She was rebellious, as wealthy young girls often are, and insisted that she loved me despite the overwhelming evidence that such a match was foolhardy. Of course her family insisted the match was impossible. Naturally, that only hardened her resolve."

"But surely she would not have married you simply out of a young girl's spite against her own wealth and family?"

"Someday you will marry and have daughters, then you will know," laughed Yumanar his cheeks growing bright and giving off a darkened hue. "Spite it was, but even at fifteen I was no fool, low-born though I might be. I loved her from the moment I saw her even then as a little girl. I love her still, far more than she will ever love me."

“Still, the Gellanda clan would not have allowed such a marriage if you did not show promise as a young soldier. They would simply have had you assigned to some distant campaign never to be heard from again,” countered Owando, putting his hand over Yumanar’s shoulder.

“It is true that I’ve some aptitude with things martial,” said Yumanar and shrugged his shoulders his eyes suddenly returning to focus. “I learned to read thanks to a kindly soldier who had the skill and took pity on the son of a camp whore. The only books to be found were of battles and tactics. I read them many times. Over and over again, endlessly. Owando, you would be surprised how few actual stratagems there are in war. Maneuver your army to a position where they have an advantage in elevation. Position yourself so that the sun is at your back. Never attack fortified positions head on. Use feints and misdirection to convince your opponent you will attack from another place. And of course, be bold. This is usually enough to win any battle, or at least it has yet to fail me.”

“You do not give yourself the credit you deserve, Yumanar,” said Owando as their horses rounded a little bend where a stream gurgled gently passed. “You ...,”

Yumanar looked up at the abrupt end of the sentence and then followed the gaze of his young friend to the stream where a completely naked woman stood, spear in hand, looking intently at the water. Her skin was fair and her hair blonde; both of which were remarkable in Caparal. She was a tiny slip of thing with barely any breasts and tiny wrists but she plunged the spear into the water with sudden ferocity. A moment later she pulled it back up with a wriggling fish at the end. She took the fish from the spear and moved it straight to her mouth where she bit the head off the thing without hesitation.

“Ughh,” said Owando and even Yumanar, a veteran of countless battles, grimaced.

The girl heard the exclamation and turned to face the two men on horseback. Without a blush or any attempt to cover her naked body she stared at them and gnashed her teeth, the flesh of the fish spitting out, “What are you looking at?”

