

## Chapter XIV: Kaythe

### *Rain Dancing*

A dip in the muddy road caused the carriage to lurch. Kaythe winced and rubbed the back of her head. She propped up her feet in their laced boots on the seat across from her and adjusted the long calf-length embroidered tunic she was wearing – the result of a compromise with her aunt over appropriate costume. With her hand she pulled back the curtain on the window. The rain outside fell in straight sheets, fading the rolling hills behind translucent blankets of noisy haze. Up ahead, where the road curved, a rocky outcrop reared out from its gentler surroundings, the grey stone walls of Fort Alharadan huddling on the peak.

“You’re gonna get yourself wet, sticking your head out there like that.”

The caramel-skinned girl appointed as her new handmaid sat in the opposite corner of the carriage. As she spoke she leaned back and raised her chin. “I mean, I don’t want to sound like your aunt, but you sure picked an awful day to tour the countryside.”

“The rain is good,” said Kaythe. “It feeds the land and it puts out fires.”

“It also makes everything cold and damp,” said Jaomi. “Look here, I’ve got goosebumps all up my arms. You gonna make the soldiers do drills in this weather?”

“It would be no more than they deserve after their recent poor conduct.” Kaythe tugged shut the curtain and frowned. “You work for Beezol, don’t you? You’re a spy. And now he’s got you watching me.”

“Protecting you,” Jaomi corrected. “And it ain’t like it were my idea. Not my usual kind of assignment. More the opposite, in fact. You expecting some real danger? Assassins maybe? Or is Beeze just being cautious?”

“How would I know?” Kaythe spat out. “How am I supposed to know anything?”

“Hey, I get it,” said Jaomi. “It’s a tight-lipped business. If I were you I would get some eyes and ears of my own. You shouldn’t rely on Beeze for everything.”

“Eyes and ears – you mean spies?”

“Listeners and watchers. People who will report to you directly. They don’t have to be on the payroll. Just let it be known that you’ll slip them something extra if they bring you a juicy tale.”

Kaythe sighed. “I always had Lyaine for that. She knew all the gossip. She had a lot of friends among the staff.”

Jaomi chuckled. “She had a big mouth too. But all the maids loved her, though they were jealous of course. You were always giving her presents.”

“Well she was like a sister to me. I should have treated her better.”

“Nah, she had enough of an attitude as it was.” There was suddenly a small dagger in Jaomi’s hand, drawn from somewhere in her clothing. Kaythe tensed but the girl was just fiddling with the blade, spinning it between her fingers. She caught the look on Kaythe’s face and stopped.

“Sorry,” she said, “force of habit.”

“How did you learn?” asked Kaythe. “To manipulate knives like that?”

Jaomi raised her eyebrows. “I don’t think teaching you knife tricks is what Beeze had in mind when he assigned me to you.”

“Forget Beezol,” said Kaythe. “I’m going to be Queen, right? I should know something about how to protect myself.”

“I’ll think about it,” was all that Jaomi would promise, and the knife disappeared.

The carriage came to a jarring halt. Kaythe pulled her feet down off the seat and peeked under a corner of the curtain. “We’ve arrived,” she announced, and a coil of anxiety uncurled in her stomach.

Kordruyt dismounted from his horse and opened the carriage door. Kestan came up behind him, staring up at the walls of the fort. Kaythe wondered if he was purposefully avoiding her eyes.

Kordruyt held his cloak out over her head and she stepped down from the carriage. She thanked him with a warm smile but pulled up the hood of her own cloak and breathed in the moist air churned by the rain with a determined swell of her chest.

The men stationed at the fort’s gate saluted her and waved her through. Growing pools of rainwater speckled the inner courtyard. The soldiers that flanked the walls in rank and file dripped from the crowns of their helmets to the hems of their tunics but managed to appear presentable. Two men came forward to greet her. One was tall and spindly. A thick, cornstalk-coloured moustache hung around his lips and a stiff, thin beard jutted out from his chin. The other was shorter with the thick-armed build of a blacksmith and deep-set eyes that looked tired under a pair of dark, heavy eyebrows. The tall man bent his torso into a careful bow.

“You grace us with your presence, Princess. Gerut Boejerron at your service.”

“Thank you, General Boejerron. I look forward to my visit.”

He smiled at her use of his new title. Then he jutted an elbow into the man beside him. The other man coughed and bowed quickly. “Dohzen Erryl—ah, at your service as well, Lady.”

“Well generals, I hope you are having no difficulties settling into your new rank. I thought this would be a good opportunity for us to get acquainted.”

“Certainly, Lady,” said General Boejerron, “The men are happy you have taken an interest in them. Would you care to inspect the ranks, or shall we retire to more hospitable quarters?”

Kaythe glanced at Kordruyt, who stood hawk-like at her right shoulder. He nodded towards the soldiers standing in the rain.

“I will inspect the men,” said Kaythe. “And there are words they must hear me speak.”

“As you wish, Lady.” The two generals exchanged glances and she wondered how much of their deference was an act. Beezol had assured her they would submit to her every request, owing her that much for their rise in rank, at least for now.

She let herself be led down the lines of soldiers. She forced herself to look at all of their faces and noted how they avoided her eyes. Most of them were at least a head taller than her. She squared her shoulder, tried to walk straighter, but felt her confidence slipping like the raindrops down her cloak. A few of the younger soldiers, boys not much older than herself, smirked as she passed. She would be the first Rycha ruler in five generations not to have been tried and tempered in battle before assuming the crown, Kaythe realized. She had done no great deeds for them to respect her for.

When they completed their circuit Kordruyt put a hand on Kaythe’s shoulder and leaned in close to her ear. “Time to give them those words, Princess. You’re a good speaker – raise your voice and they’ll listen to you.”

Kaythe hoped so. Words were all she had.

She pulled down the hood of her cloak and shivered a little at the sudden pound of raindrops on her skull, but she wanted them to see her face.

“Soldiers of Fort Alharadan,” she began, “you knew my father, now know me. I am Kaythe Rycha and soon I will be your Queen.”

There was some muttering from the back ranks.

“Silence, boys,” shouted General Boejerron. “The Lady is speaking.”

Kaythe pitched her voice louder and hated the girlish tones she could hear in it. “You men are the protectors of our kingdom. You are our brave warriors. But I was not proud of what I witnessed six days ago.” She began to pace along the lines. “You were sent into the city to quell the riots but you did more damage than the rioters. My father did not ask this of you. I did not ask this of you. A true Rycha did not ask this of you. Yet my city burned. Now, you can blame this on politics but I have to wonder if my father was wrong in his estimation of your company. Well-disciplined soldiers, he called you. Loyal to the crown, he called you. The force that has kept the peace these many years, he called you. But none of these things I saw six days ago. Six days ago when you let my city burn you shamed your good name as soldiers of the crown. That is why I have replaced your generals, and that is why I am here now.”

Kaythe picked a man who was short enough for her to look him in the eyes and stood as close to him as she dared. “You, soldier, what have you to say for yourself?”

The man blinked rapidly but kept composure. “Nothing, Lady,” he mumbled.

“Nothing?” she stepped back from him. “Well at least you make no excuses. You should know that I am also here to give you a chance to alter my opinions. I have great aspirations for you all, but I will not put my faith or my gold in soldiers I cannot trust.” She pointed an arm towards Kordruyt. “This is a man I do trust. His name is Kordruyt Valloughry and he is my new War Minister. You will extend to him the respect you give your Generals and you will allow him to observe every detail of your conduct and your training. In this manner, we will build our trust.”

She waved to the Generals and they rushed to stand beside her. “I have new training and patrol requirements which Minister Valloughry and I will discuss with you,” she told them. “But before we settle anything, there is one thing your men must be made to understand. Effective today, we are pulling in all our forces from the Firewind borders and no patrols are to be conducted in that territory until I give my express consent.”

The Generals looked grim, but not entirely surprised. They nodded.

In the ranks, the soldiers began shifting and the muttering started up again.

“Bloody wormlovers,” said one of the men, quite clearly, and out of the corner of her eye Kaythe saw him turn his head and split loudly on the ground of the courtyard.

Immediately, Kordruyt was in front of him, a finger against the other man’s chest, staring him down. “Care to say that again to my face soldier?”

Kaythe went and put her hand on Kordruyt’s arm. Then she got a good look at the soldier. He had his hood down and his light hair was plastered against his skull in a matted tangle. It was his cold blue eyes that she remembered.

“I know you,” she said. “I don’t think I caught your name, on the bridge.”

“Captain Trieste Duvordel.” He looked up at the sky, then down at her and smiled.

“Don’t see your flying beast. Does he not like the rain?”

Kordruyt grabbed a clump of the Captain’s shirt in his fist. “I don’t like your tone. Take my advice and humble yourself. You’re in the presence of royalty.”

“Sir, open your eyes, she’s gonna sell us to the Firewinds.”

“The Firewinds are no longer your concern,” Kaythe told him. “I will trade you that insult for the kick I gave you on the bridge, but speak it again and you commit treason.”

“Forgive me, Lady, if I speak the truth.”

“I could kill you where you stand for that,” Kordruyt warned.

“Go ahead,” Trieste challenged. “It will be a better death than the one she gave my cousin.”

“Your cousin?”

“His name was Cyartvod. He was a good soldier.”

“Yes,” said Kaythe, “and he murdered my father, your King.”

“That is a lie told by those filthy Firewinds to cover up their own crime.”

“It is the truth. Your rampant hate blinds you.”

In reply, Trieste bent his head and spit on her boot.

Kordruyt put his hand on his sword. “Just give the word, Princess.”

Kaythe stared down at her boot and was frozen.

“If the man has a grievance, let him fight for it.”

Kaythe looked up to find Kestan beside her. The Firewind had his eyes on Trieste. “In my country, what you have just spoken is considered a blood challenge. It is resolved in single combat, either weaponless or with blades. Now, you could fight her,” he nodded to Kaythe, “and probably lose. Or, if you prefer, you could fight me.” He tapped the hilt of his sword rather eagerly.

“And you are...?” Trieste asked.

“Her flying beast,” said Kestan, and winked. “Want to see my wings?”

Kaythe felt relieved at his intervention and immediately chided herself for it. When she was Queen she would face far more difficult decisions. “Let me handle this, Kestan. His issue is with me.”

“I think his issue is with Firewinds, Princess,” said Kestan. Kaythe caught a glimmer in his brown eyes. She’d seen that look before.

“Hate I can accept,” said Kestan, “my race has no need for love and admiration beyond its borders. But we do value honour. Even the honour practiced by misguided men.”

Kaythe shook her head at him, pleading.

“The boy’s got a point,” said Kordruyt. Kaythe felt the situation slipping out of her hands.

“If I fight you it will be man to man, no unnatural transformations,” said Trieste.

“Of course,” agreed Kestan. “Do you accept the challenge?”

“With pleasure. You’d better hope that sword you wear is more than a noble’s toy.”

“Blades, then? Excellent. Don’t worry, you’ll feel the sharpness of my edge soon enough.”

“I’ll need my weapon.”

Still clutching the Captain’s shirt, Kordruyt hollered, “Get the man a sword.” There was scrambling as the soldiers around them broke rank. Someone shoved a blade into Trieste’s hands. Freed finally by Kordruyt, the soldier tested the weapon’s balance with a few practice strokes. “It will do,” he declared at last, and stripped off his cloak. Kestan did likewise.

Kaythe felt a hand on her arm and found Jaomi beside her. “You might want to give them some room,” said her new handmaid. Kaythe allowed herself to be pulled to the edge of the rough circle of soldiers that was quickly forming around the two men.

Kestan stretched his arms behind his head and shrugged under the wet weight of his tunic. He grimaced and tugged off that garment as well.

Jaomi chuckled. “Well there’s one who likes to show off.”

Kaythe was clamping her jaw too tight to smile.

Trieste hopped a few times in place and shook his hair, spraying beads of water into a momentary crown. His fellow soldiers began calling out encouragements. "Beat him bloody, Tri." "Cut up the cocky wyrm."

Kestan smiled at the insults. He readied his sword. "Anytime you're ready, soldier."

Trieste spat on the ground between them. Then he charged.

His first attack slashed high. Kestan parried and sidestepped, dancing around his opponent. Trieste spun to follow him and this time lunged for the gut. Kestan didn't even bother to block it, he just stepped back.

"You think you're fast, don't you?" said Trieste. "Let's see if I can't slow you down." He unleashed a sequence of attacks, putting his substantial muscle into the strokes. Kestan stayed on the defensive, deflecting each in turn. Abruptly, Trieste broke his momentum and cut low. Kestan dodged but caught a bit of the edge on his left thigh. A thin line of blood welled up to stain his trousers.

Kaythe clenched her hands into fists.

"The Firewind can bleed," laughed Trieste, and the soldiers cheered. "Maybe he should run away now before I spill some more."

Kestan put his left hand down and touched the shallow wound with a finger. It glistened freshly red when he brought it to his lips. He sucked it off. "You want more of this?" he asked Trieste, "Come taste."

Trieste was happy to oblige. Again and again, he brought his sword down into clashing combat with Kestan's. Kaythe began to feel the ringing of metal deep in her ears. Kestan kept moving as he parried, but there was a slight limp in his dance now. Stiff at her sides, Kaythe's arms felt heavy. She blinked through the rain and thought she could taste Kestan's blood in her mouth. She watched the rain streaming down his bare skin and licked her lips. Her skin seemed cold but burning. Trieste swung his sword in a mighty arc that would have taken off Kestan's head if he hadn't ducked. The soldier quickly checked his swing as though he expected a counter-thrust but none came. Kestan kept dancing.

"He's not pressing an attack," said Kaythe, wanting to put her voice in to the crowd. "Why isn't he attacking?"

Kordruyt just shook his head, but Jaomi began miming moves with her hands. "He's letting him get tired," she whispered, "waiting for him to make a mistake."

"He's dragging it out," said Kaythe, "when he should be ending it quickly." She wondered what it would be like to have cold steel pierce her skin. Or what her father had felt when Cyartvod stabbed him.

Trieste suddenly broke form and kicked the dirt, sending up a spray of muddied earth. "Stop holding back, wyrm. Or are you a flower-headed coward? Stop dodging and face me!"

"If you insist." Kestan caught Trieste's next swipe with the flat of his blade and sent it back with a shove, forcing the weapon wide. Then he stepped in, took his right hand off the hilt of his sword, and thrust his fisted knuckles into the other man's face.

Trieste stumbled backward, his left hand under his nose, trying to stem the sudden shock of blood that dribbled down his jaw and throat.

"How does yours taste?" asked Kestan.

Trieste let out a stream of blood-spitting curses. "Do you want honour or a tavern brawl, wyrm? If it's the latter you may as well drop your blade."

"Where's the fun in that? I thought you wanted to cut me up. Or do we have to call in a surgeon for your bloody nose?"

Trieste wiped his hand on his shirt and held out his arms. "I dare you to try that move on me again. Come on and hit me, maggot-eater."

"You speak rashly," said Kestan. "You might lose a limb for that." He hopped into a running start, feet shattering pools of water, and brought his sword down in a bright arc. Then it was Trieste doing the dodging, falling back from the slices and thrusts that were levelled against him, forced to twist his body again and again to avoid the quick bite of the blade. Kestan's arms swung in a blurred fury. *Gods, he's fast*, thought Kaythe. He kept Trieste off balance now, forcing him to stay defensive. Inevitably, Trieste misjudged a stroke or two. Shallow cuts appeared on his upper arms, his left shoulder, and finally along his left side. The last one made him cry out but he didn't fall back. Instead the pain seemed to jolt him into a rally. His parries became surer and soon he began to counter with thrusts that disrupted the steady pace of Kestan's blows.

"You fight well," acknowledged Kestan, "but I do not think it will be enough."

In reply, Trieste grunted as he levelled a powerful swing. Kestan made as if to parry it, but at the last second ducked and spun left. Smooth as water with the momentum of his spin, he shifted his sword to his left hand and sent the blade whipping in a backhand stroke toward Trieste's exposed torso. Trieste saw it coming, tried to recover from his swing, but his own sword could not cross the distance in time to make the parry. Kaythe saw his left arm come up and let out a little gasp. It had to be that he was an infantry man, used to fighting with a shield, otherwise that last gesture made no sense. For the first time since the match began, the on-looking soldiers were silent. Kaythe felt a shudder of pleasure overtop nausea.

Trieste fell to his knees. His clutched his left arm against his chest and his mouth hung open. Drops of rain streamed off his upper lip. On the ground beside him, indented in the edge of a shallow, reddened puddle, lay three severed fingers. Blood seeped like slow liquid fog where the ends touched the water.

Kestan wiped his sword on his trousers and returned it to its sheath. "Those fingers," he told Trieste, "are the price you pay for insulting my bride and your soon-to-be Queen. Your life I leave you, not from pity, but because you fought well and with honour." His head turned and his eyes found Kaythe's. The palms of her hands went cold as ice as he strode to where she stood and knelt at her feet. The formality of his speech seemed strange and made her wonder about all the Firewind customs that she'd never paid proper attention to in her lessons. For once, he actually spoke like nobility. His eyes begged something from her and she did not understand what they were asking.

"Lady," he said to her, speaking, she guessed, more to the soldiers in the courtyard. "From this day forward, my fealty is not to my father or my race, but to you. Command this body as you will."

"I accept," said Kaythe, her voice almost breaking. "Rise, please."

"You hear that?" bellowed Kordruyt to the silent soldiers of the north army. "This one is ours now."