



AUTHOR PROFILE

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Bound by the Enemy

The arrow sang through the cold evening air like a shriek torn from the sky.

Jian only saw the glint—sharp, silver, sure—before a smaller body flung itself into its path.

“Gege!”

Xiao Liu’s cry split the chaos.

Her braid whipped behind her as she leapt. The arrow meant for Jian buried itself in her chest with a sound that he would hear every night for the rest of his life.

For a heartbeat the battlefield froze. Dust hung in the air. Men shouted in two languages along the riverbank—Tang commands, Ashina war cries. Horses reared and screamed. But all sound blurred into a distant roar as Jian fell to his knees and caught his sister before she hit the ground.

Blood poured through his fingers, hot and sticky, soaking the front of his armor.

“Liu... Liu, look at me.” His voice broke, rising higher than a general’s voice should ever go. He was thirteen, and suddenly he sounded younger.

She smiled as if nothing were wrong. "I did... something useful," she whispered, lips trembling. "You always... protect me. Just once... I wanted to protect you."

"Doctor!" Jian shouted. "Medic! Now!"

The Tang banner whipped overhead in the wind. Across the river, the Ashina standard—wolf-head sigil—snapped in defiance. Their Qaghan sat on a warhorse, bow still raised, his lynx-like eyes narrowing as he watched.

The Qaghan had not meant to kill a girl. The arrow had been aimed directly at the young Tang prince whose armored form shone like a challenge in the bloody dusk. But the wind shifted, and fate was cruel, and now the little princess lay dying in her brother's arms.

"Don't sleep," Jian begged, pressing his forehead to hers. "Liu, stay awake. Father is coming. He'll fix everything."

She shook her head weakly. "Promise me something instead."

"Anything."

Her eyes, usually bright and full of mischief, were strangely calm. "Don't let this be for nothing."

He didn't understand. He only understood that the warmth in her body was fading and terror was clawing through his ribs.

"Don't... let them forget me." A hint of pride touched her tone, so small, so fragile. "I saved the mighty Abyss Sword before he even earned his title."

Her fingers brushed his cheek. He clutched her hand.

"Liu—"

He felt it when she was gone. Not because of some divine sign, but because her fingers slipped from his and the light left her eyes.

The world went silent.

Then something inside Jian cracked.

He stood slowly, very slowly, and turned toward the Ashina lines. His vision narrowed until all he saw was the Qaghan on his dark horse, with the wolf banners dancing around him like mocking spirits.

Jian drew his sword.

One day, he swore in the ruins of his childhood, he would drag the Qaghan's world into the same kind of darkness that had swallowed Liu. One day, the Ashina would know what it meant to lose everything.

Fifteen Years Later

They called him Shenyuan Jian now—the Abyss Sword.

The name had begun as a whisper traded between soldiers who watched him cut through enemy lines with terrifying calm. Over time, it became a title spoken with respect and fear. Some swore that if you looked into his eyes on the battlefield, you could see the reflection of a bottomless pit.

Jian himself rarely thought about the name. He thought about discipline, formations, supply lines, the Emperor's moods, and the quiet room where his sister's hair ribbon lay wrapped in scarlet silk.

He thought about the Ashina.

"Your Highness?" General Wei's voice broke through his thoughts.

Jian stood at the edge of a narrow valley, arms folded over his chest, black hair tied loosely at the nape of his neck. The wind tugged at his cloak, carrying with it the dry scent of the northern plains.

"Report," he said.

"The scouts confirmed it," Wei replied. "Ashina riders are moving towards the pass. Their banner shows

Mojilian's personal unit."

Mojilian.

Jian's jaw tightened.

The first time he had faced Ilterish's son—Mojilian, wise, about to be the Qaghan—Jian had been surprised.

He had expected a savage brute. Instead, he had met calm eyes that weighed terrain and troop morale with the same cold precision Jian himself used. In their first clash, Mojilian had sacrificed half a flank to draw Jian into a trap that would have taken the Tang vanguard if Jian had not recognized the pattern one breath before it closed.

Since then, they had tested each other more than once. Steel against steel. Mind against mind.

Enemies. Mirrors.

"Set the ambush," Jian ordered. "We'll meet him in the valley."

Wei hesitated. "Your Highness, Mojilian is known for his feints. If he expects you to attack from the shadows—"

"That is precisely why we will do it differently," Jian said. He turned, lynx-like eyes glinting. "We will not hide. We will stand in the open."

Wei blinked. "In the open? Against Ashina horsemen?"

"Yes," Jian said. "Tell the men: arrange pikes in three staggered lines, shield-bearers behind. I will ride at the front."

Wei bowed and hurried off to relay the orders.

Jian rested his hand on the hilt of his sword, the leather grip worn smooth where his fingers always touched it. The Ashina pretended to retreat making the Tang chase them. Little did the Tang know... It is now as if they were in the wolf's trap, surrounded by their troops shaped like a crescent.

Mojilian again.

Ilterish's son. The man whose strategies had stalled Tang advances for years. The man under whose banner Tang soldiers had fallen—too many, too young. The man who, if the winds of fate had blown differently, might have been his equal in a court instead of his opposite on a battlefield.

Sometimes, in the quiet between clashes, Jian wondered what it would have been like to sit across a table from Mojilian instead of trying to kill him. To discuss roads and taxes, irrigation and trade.

He did not linger on those thoughts. There was no space for softness in a heart built on sharpened grief.

They lost that day.

The Second Clash

The valley funneled the wind into a low howl.

Ashina riders poured in first—dark shapes against pale dust, their horses' hooves pounding the earth like drums. Wolf banners streamed behind them, a river of black and silver.

At their head rode Mojilian.

Jian watched from his horse at the center of the Tang line. His armor was dark, inlaid with patterns like coiled waves. His expression gave nothing away.

"Hold," he murmured.

The first wave of Ashina riders descended, expecting to crash into scattered Tang scouts. Instead, they met a wall. Pikes bristled like a forest of iron, shields locked. The horses screamed and swerved, momentum broken.

Mojilian raised his hand. The riders widened, wheeled, regrouped. He adapted quickly—as Jian had expected.

Soon the valley rang with the clash of steel and the screams of men. Jian moved through the chaos like a shadow, blade rising and falling, his cloak snapping around him.

Then he saw Mojilian break away from his guard and ride towards him.

For a heartbeat, the sounds around them seemed to dim. Jian urged his horse forward.

They met in the center of the field with a crash, blades scraping sparks as they crossed.

“Prince of Tang,” Mojilian greeted dryly, teeth flashing in a brief, humorless smile. Up close, his face looked younger than his legend, but his eyes were old. “Still hiding your hatred behind manners?”

Jian’s lips curved in a thin line. “Their wise heir,” he replied. “Still pretending you know nothing of the arrow that killed my sister?”

They traded blows, swords a blur. Horses snorted and danced beneath them, trained to this kind of deadly dance.

Mojilian’s gaze flickered—sharply, briefly. “You think bringing your grief to this valley will change that day?” he asked, breath steady despite the duel. “Blood has already sunk into both our grounds, Tang.”

“And more will sink,” Jian said, parrying, twisting, driving forward. “Until your father pays.”

Mojilian’s eyes darkened, but his wrist remained steady. Their blades locked, faces close.

“Our dead are many,” Mojilian said quietly. “If we start counting, Jian, neither of us will ever stop.”

“Then we don’t stop,” Jian answered.

For a moment, there was something almost like pity in Mojilian’s gaze. Then he kicked off, shoving Jian’s blade away and calling something in his own tongue.

Ashina horns sounded—a sharp, winding call for retreat.

Jian prepared for a desperate strike against their back as they withdrew. But instead of fleeing in chaos, the riders pulled away in an organized formation, shields protecting their wounded.

Mojilian raised his sword in a brief salute—a gesture no one but Jian was close enough to see.

The prince did not return it, but his eyes followed the Ashina commander as he disappeared beyond the ridge.

Later, when the dust settled and scouts reported that Mojilian's forces had withdrawn entirely from the region, Emperor Xiao Wexian praised Jian's victory in court. Poets wrote about the Abyss Sword whose gaze turned valleys into graveyards.

None of them understood that Jian did not want poems.

He wanted an ending.

The Girl in the Forest

It was on a different day, on a border patrol far from the capital, that Jian's path crossed with the girl who would ruin all his plans without meaning to.

He rode at the back of the small Tang escort, dressed in plain armor, his hair tied in a simple knot. The Emperor had ordered him to inspect a string of watchtowers near the frontier, but Jian preferred to travel light and unmarked here. The border had its own rules—ones that titles could not bend.

They found the carriage just past noon.

Smoke still curled from the overturned wheels. Bodies lay scattered in the grass: bandits, from the look of their mismatched armor. A few Tang guards too, their spears fallen from stiff hands.

"Check for survivors," Jian ordered.

He dismounted, boots crunching on broken wood. His hand remained on his sword, but his senses stretched

past the battlefield—a habit honed after years of ambushes.

He heard a faint scuffle behind the wreckage.

In one smooth motion, he stepped around the shattered carriage and lifted his sword—

—and almost impaled a woman.

She stood before him, hair unbound and tangled, dress torn at the hem, eyes blazing. She had dragged one of the dead bandits' knives into her hand. Without the slightest hesitation, she slashed at him.

Jian twisted, but the blade still scratched his forearm, cutting through his sleeve. A line of blood appeared—thin, but bright.

She froze, shocked that she had actually wounded him. Then she bared her teeth like a cornered wolf and struck again.

“Enough,” Jian said, catching her wrist.

Her skin burned under his fingers, either from fear or fury. She tried to yank away, but he tightened his grip just enough to make the knife drop.

“I just saved your life,” he said coldly. “You are welcome.”

“I did not ask to be saved by Tang,” she spat, accent wrapping around the last word like it was poison.

His gaze dropped to her neck.

There, resting against skin still marked by dust and sweat, hung a pendant—a small piece of metal carved with a familiar wolf's head.

Ashina.

His entire body went still.

"What is your name?" he asked.

She hesitated, then lifted her chin. "İlsu," she said. "Daughter of Qaghan İlterish of the Ashina."

The world narrowed to that one word. Daughter.

İlterish.

Jian's fingers tightened reflexively. The woman flinched but did not look away.

He should have killed her.

The thought came calm and clear, as practical as calculating camp rations. It would not be difficult. One pull, one thrust, and the bloodline he hated would bleed out on this forgotten road.

But another thought rose, slow and poisonous.

Leverage.

Not yet, he told the part of him that still remembered Jiangnan poetry and his sister's laugh. Not here, in front of witnesses. Not when he did not yet know what this girl could be used for.

So he let go of her wrist.

"Stand up," he commanded. "The bandits are dead. Your guards could not protect you. You are in Tang territory now."

She scrambled to her feet, ignoring his offered hand. Dust streaked her cheeks, but her eyes burned like the steppe fire he had seen from afar.

"Do not think this makes you my savior," she said. "If I had another blade, I would cut you again."

He almost laughed.

"If you had another blade," Jian replied, "you would be dead. You do not know how to use one."

Her nostrils flared. "You think all Ashina women are helpless?"

"I think you just slashed at your rescuer like a child," he said. "If you want to kill me, you'll need more than stubbornness."

He could feel his men watching, confused by his harsh tone. Let them be confused. None of them could see the storm inside him.

He turned away from Ilsu deliberately. "Take her to the nearest outpost," he told his captain. "Treat her wounds. Return her to her people at the border. If she dies on Tang land, I will hold you responsible."

The captain bowed quickly. "Yes, Your Highness."

Jian walked back to his horse as if it cost him nothing to leave her alive.

He did not look back at the Ashina pendant that glinted at her throat.

He did not reason with the part of himself that whispered that this was interesting—that fate had placed Ilterish's daughter in his palm and he had closed his hand.

Later, when he washed the blood from his arm, he stared at the thin scar her knife had left.

Ilsu.

The name moved like a pebble in a riverbed—small, insignificant, but capable of changing the water's path over time.

The Proposal

Fifteen years had passed since Liu's death. Five since Jian's first duel with Mojilian. Three since he had found an Ashina girl with fire in her eyes and a wolf on her neck in a ruined forest road.

When Jian finally entered the imperial hall with his proposal, the court fell silent.

Emperor Xiao Wexian sat on the dragon throne, shoulders heavy with brocade, eyes sharp under his crown. Beside him, the Empress watched calmly, fingers folded over painted silk, a woman whose gentleness hid a spine of steel.

“Rise, Jian,” the Emperor said. “You asked for this audience. Speak.”

Jian rose from his bow.

“Your Majesty,” he said, voice steady. “I have come to propose an end to the war with the Ashina.”

Murmurs rippled through the hall. Some ministers laughed, quickly silenced by a look from Wexian.

“An end?” the Emperor repeated. “We have tried to end it many times. They raid our borders. They break their oaths. What makes you think they will stop?”

“We have always offered peace while holding them at sword-point,” Jian replied. “They see our treaties as chains. If we want a different outcome, we must use a different method.”

The Minister of Rites frowned. “You speak of heqin?” he asked. “We have no princesses left to send. Unless you mean to dig up the graves of the dead and marry bones to wolves.”

A few courtiers chuckled nervously.

Jian’s lips did not move. “No,” he said. “This time, Tang will not give a princess.”

A pause.

“I will marry,” Jian said. “An Ashina princess.”

The hall erupted. Voices crashed against each other—shock, outrage, whispers of “impossible” and “insane.” Some shouted that sending a prince was an insult to the throne, others that it was too generous.

The Emperor raised his hand. Silence fell like a blade.

“You would wed an enemy Qaghan’s daughter,” Wexian said slowly, searching his son’s unreadable face. “Knowing their blood has stained our borders for generations. Knowing that Ilterish himself shot your sister.”

“I know,” Jian said. His hands were clasped behind his back so no one saw the whiteness of his knuckles. “I also know that as long as the Ashina exist as they are now, this war will never truly end. If they will not be bent by steel, then we must bind them with blood. Our blood.”

“Why now?” the Empress asked quietly.

Jian’s gaze flickered to hers. She had always been kinder than he deserved. She alone had sat with him on the nights his nightmares dragged him from sleep, soaked in sweat, with Liu’s name torn from his throat.

“The north is tired,” he said. “Our people, their people. A famine will come with the next bad harvest. A new war will be a grave for both sides. We need time. We need space to pull the claws from this feud.”

“And you,” Wexian said. “What do you need, my son?”

Jian swallowed the answer. I need my sister back. I need a past that does not shackle my future.

Instead he said, “I need a reason to stand in the same hall as Ilterish and not cut him down. A marriage gives me that. Peace gives me what vengeance cannot.”

It was not entirely a lie. He had always been good at mixing truths.

The Emperor studied him, searching for a weakness. Jian let him look.

Finally, Wexian nodded once. “Very well,” he said. “We will send the proposal. If Ilterish is as desperate for peace as his envoys claim, he will accept. If he refuses, everyone will see it is the Ashina who choose war.”

“And if he accepts?” the Minister of War asked.

“Then we will have his daughter in our palace,” Jian said softly. “And we will see what the wolf does when its cub lies in a dragon’s den.”

The Steppe Before Goodbye

When Ilterish Qaghan told İlsu about the marriage, she thought it was a joke.

“You must be ill,” she said, half-laughing, half-afraid. The golden grass of the steppe waved around them, the sky so wide it made her feel small. “You are the one who swore we would never bend to Tang tricks. Who said their hegin is a collar.”

İlterish’s face, lined by battle and wind, did not soften. “I remember what I swore,” he replied. “And I remember the day my arrow killed a child.”

İlsu’s fingers tightened around the reins. She and her father rode side by side, their horses moving in a slow circle around the main camp. The scent of smoke and horsehair filled the air. Children raced between felt tents, laughing.

“That was war,” she said. “You did what you had to. She should not have been on the battlefield.”

“Perhaps,” he said. His gaze drifted to the horizon. “It does not change what happened.”

“He is Tang,” İlsu continued stubbornly. “They chained our ancestors. They blinded your father’s father. They think sending women binds us to them. And now you want to send your own daughter?”

İlterish did not answer at once. Somewhere behind them, a familiar voice was shouting orders—Mojilian, drilling a unit of warriors with the patience of a brother and the cold demand of a commander.

“I want our people to live,” Ilterish said finally. “I want the children running between our tents to grow old. I want your brother to die in bed, not by a Tang arrow. If one marriage buys us time, I will pay that price.”

“You would sell me,” she whispered.

He flinched, very slightly. “I would trust you,” he said. “To stand in their palace and remain Ashina. To remind them that wolves do not become dogs because they sleep near dragons.”

“You always said—” Her voice broke. “You always said no Ashina should ever bow before Tang.”

"I am not asking you to bow," he said quietly. "I am asking you to walk into their den with your head high and your eyes open. There is a difference."

She looked away, teeth clenched so hard her jaw hurt.

In her mind she saw Mojilian's warm smile when she fell off a horse as a child and scraped her knees. She heard Tuñuquq's gravelly lectures about history, about pride, about the dangers of silk and soft pillows. She felt the wind on her face when she rode out with the scouts at dawn, hair flying free.

All of that, torn away because of some Tang prince who wanted a pretty political tie.

"I won't go," she said at last. "I will run. I will hide. I will—"

"İlsu." Her father's voice cut through hers, rough and heavy. "Do you think I have not thought of that? Do you think I want to see you crossing into their lands?"

"Then don't send me," she pleaded.

He looked older than she had ever seen him.

"We lost your little sister to their border chaos already," he said quietly. "İpar ran in the confusion of war and never came back. I will not lose more of our people to pride alone."

The name twisted deep inside İlsu like a knife. İpar, who had been all big eyes and restless feet. İpar, who had vanished at five years old when soldiers clashed too close to camp and dust turned the world blind.

"İpar is gone," İlsu whispered. "And now you would send me where she vanished."

İlterish rode in silence for several moments. When he spoke again, his voice was tired.

"Tuñuquq will speak to you," he said. "Listen to him. Then give me your answer. But know this, İlsu: answer or no, the tide is rising. If we do nothing, the next wave will drown us."

That night, İlsu sat outside Mojilian's tent, knees drawn to her chest, watching the stars.

Mojilian came out quietly, cloak thrown over bare shoulders, hair unbound from its usual battle knot. For once, the wise, calculating commander was only a brother.

"You heard?" Ilsu asked.

He nodded, sitting beside her. "Father told me. He did not tell me how much it tears him apart."

"I will not go," she said fiercely. "I will ride away if I must. They cannot marry an empty saddle."

Mojilian laughed once, but there was no joy in it. "You always think in straight lines," he murmured. "Run from here, arrive there. But life does not always work that way."

"Then tell Father he is wrong." She turned on him, eyes shining with desperation. "You are Mojilian. Everyone listens to you. You can stop this."

"I have tried to stop many things," he said. "The river still flows."

Her hands trembled. "So you would let them take me?"

His jaw clenched. "If I stand in front of Father on this, if I push too hard, I may break the only fragile peace we have now. Ilterish is not sending you because he wants to. He is sending you because he does not see another path yet. Until I can open a different road, I must walk this one with him."

He reached out and brushed a strand of hair from her face, the way he used to when she was a child crying over scraped palms.

"Listen to me," he said softly. "If you go, you do not go alone. My eyes will follow you. My mind will watch their moves. I have fought this Tang prince twice already. Jian. He is not a fool. He is not a soft court peacock. If he hurts you..."

Mojilian's usually gentle gaze turned cold and sharp as drawn steel.

"...I will burn their world," he finished calmly.

İlsu's throat tightened.

She leaned into him, just for a moment, letting herself be the little sister he had always protected. He rested his chin briefly on the top of her head.

The steppe wind hummed around them, carrying the smell of smoke and mares' milk, of home.

Later that night, Tuñuquq sat with her, talking in circles about history and oaths and the weight of choices. His words were wise, but they did not make her heart hurt less.

When dawn came, İlsu gave her answer.

She would go, because her pride was not greater than her people's lives.

But in her heart, she swore that no Tang prince would ever see her kneel.

The Lion's Den

The Tang delegation arrived under banners that glittered in the sun.

İlsu stood beside her father, Mojilian, and Tuñuquq in the great tent, wearing brocade heavier than any armor. Her hair was braided and threaded with gold; the wolf pendant rested just beneath her throat.

When the Tang prince walked in, the world narrowed.

She knew him instantly.

The plain clothes were gone, replaced by dark ceremonial armor trimmed in gold. His hair was tied back with a jade clasp; a formal crown rested above it. But his eyes were the same—sharp, unreadable, cold like water cut by moonlight.

"You," she breathed.

His gaze flicked over her with infuriating calm, as if he were cataloguing her like a horse or a piece of silk. Then he bowed to Ilterish and spoke in the polished tones of the court.

“Your Majesty of Ashina,” he said. “This humble son of Tang greets you. I am Xiao Jian.”

Ashina and Tang words floated around them—formal phrases about peace, alliance, future generations. But beneath them, something darker moved.

Mojilian watched Jian with the assessing stare of a strategist who had crossed swords with him and survived. Their gazes met—a cold warning from brother to prince: If you hurt her, I will break you.

Jian did not flinch. But somewhere in his chest, a familiar heat stirred.

İlsu.

The girl who had scratched his arm. The Qaghan’s daughter. The weapon he had accidentally found years earlier.

Fate really did prefer irony.

When their eyes met fully, for one long breath, something sparked between them.

Hatred, she thought.

Possibility, he corrected silently.

The marriage negotiations were swift. Both sides were too tired of war to waste words. They agreed on the dowry, the escort, the timing.

In the days before her departure, İlsu rode to the edges of camp whenever she could, letting the wind tear tears from her eyes so no one would see.

She memorized everything—the shape of the hills, the pattern of stars, Mojilian’s silhouette as he drilled his warriors at dusk, Tuñuquq’s grumbling voice as he argued with Ilterish. She etched them into her heart like carvings in bone.

On the morning she left, Mojilian clasped her forearms and pulled her close.

“Remember this,” he said roughly. “You are Ashina, wherever you stand. You are my sister. If their palace walls close in on you, think of the steppe. Think of the fact that if you scream my name in your heart, I will hear it.”

She laughed wetly. “That is not how hearing works.”

“It is how ours works,” he insisted, half-steady, half-breaking. “Do you understand?”

She nodded, swallowing hard.

Tuñuquq pressed a small carved token into her hand—an old charm, worn smooth by time. “Keep this hidden,” he murmured. “Like your anger. Show neither unless necessary.”

Then she rode with the Tang delegation towards a future she hated.

The wedding in the Tang capital was dazzling.

Lanterns hung from every rooftop, casting warm light over painted eaves. Perfume drifted through the palace halls, mixing with incense and the faint, metallic tang of ceremonial weapons.

İlsu walked through it all as if in a dream.

People bowed. Musicians played. The Empress greeted her with surprising warmth, hands gentle as she adjusted İlsu’s veil.

“Welcome, child,” the Empress murmured in careful Ashina, a language she had taken the trouble to learn. “You have a brave heart to come so far.”

Tears stung İlsu’s eyes. She blinked them away. “I came because my people needed me to,” she replied. “That does not make me brave.”

“Sometimes walking into a cage with your eyes open is the bravest thing,” the Empress said quietly.

“Remember that.”

When Jian joined her in the ceremonial hall, he looked every inch the royal general. The Abyss Sword dressed as a groom.

Their hands were tied together with red silk as the priests chanted blessings about harmony and prosperity. Outside, fireworks cracked, announcing to the city that peace between Tang and Ashina had been sealed with a wedding.

Everyone saw a perfect scene.

No one saw the shadow in Jian’s eyes when the red veil was finally lifted and he looked down at İlsu, at the Ashina pendant glinting stubbornly at her throat.

No one heard the promise he whispered to himself:

Liu, this is for you.

Behind Closed Doors

In public, Jian was a flawless husband.

He walked beside İlsu with dignified distance, never too cold, never too warm. He introduced her to the court with the correct titles. He ensured she had proper clothes, attendants who could speak her language, a seat beside the Empress at feasts.

Court ladies whispered about how gentle he seemed. Foreign envoys praised the union. Poets wrote about the Tang general who had set aside ancient hatred to marry his enemy’s daughter for peace.

They did not see what happened when the lacquered doors closed.

The first night, when the servants left them alone in the bridal chamber, the silence was thick.

Red silk draped the bed; candles painted Jian's face in flickering gold and shadow. Iisu stood near the window, spine straight, hands folded to stop them from trembling.

"You play your role well," she said finally. "Smiling in front of your people. I almost believed you were truly seeking peace."

He turned towards her slowly.

"Peace," he repeated. "What a strange word from an Ashina mouth."

"Strange?" she echoed.

"You speak of peace," he said, voice soft, almost conversational. "But your father's arrow did not seek peace when it flew into my sister's chest."

Her breath hitched. "That was... years ago."

"Yes," Jian agreed. "And she is still dead."

He moved closer. She forced herself not to step back.

"What do you want from me?" she demanded. "If this marriage is a punishment, say it. If it is a truce, then act like it."

He smiled, and it was a terrible thing.

"A truce," he said, "requires both sides to lay down their weapons. Tell me, Iisu—what have you laid down?"

"My home," she shot back. "My freedom. My brother's protection. The steppe. Is that not enough?"

"For now," he said.

He clapped his hands. A guard slid the door open from the outside, bowing.

"Bring her," Jian said.

They brought İpar in.

At first, İlsu did not recognize the girl. She was taller now, hair longer, wearing simple Tang clothes. Her eyes were the same—wide, curious, frightened.

“A- aba?” she whispered.

İlsu’s knees nearly gave way.

“İpar?” Her voice broke on the name. “İpar, is that—are you—?”

“I thought you died,” İpar sobbed, flinging herself forward. “They said I was lost, that I...”

She clung to İlsu, shaking.

For a moment, the room dissolved. There was only the warmth of a little sister’s body, the smell of her hair, the sound of her breath.

Then Jian’s voice cut through, cool and precise.

“I found her,” he said. “Years ago. She wandered into our camp after a battle. Your father never knew she lived. I saw the wolf pendant around her neck and realized what she was.”

İlsu turned slowly, holding İpar behind her.

“You kept her,” she said. “All this time. You kept my sister here and you never sent word.”

“Why would I give up such a useful piece on the board?” he asked mildly.

Her heart stuttered. “Useful?”

“You love your people,” Jian said. “You loved your freedom. You hate me. You may think of running, of defying, of sending clever messages to Mojilian.”

His eyes hardened.

“Now you will think of her,” he finished.

İpar gave a small, frightened sound.

“If you try to escape,” Jian continued, each word as sharp as a blade, “she will suffer. If you send messages to your brother, she will suffer. If you even think of working against Tang, I will have her marched through the capital in chains.”

It felt like being slapped.

“You wouldn’t,” İlsu whispered.

His expression did not change. “Wouldn’t I?” he asked softly. “Ask the men who met me on the northern plains. Ask the ones buried beneath the snow. My mercy died with my sister.”

Tears burned in İlsu’s eyes. She refused to let them fall in front of him.

“You are a monster,” she said.

He smiled, thin and cold. “Yes,” he replied. “And you walked into my den.”

He stepped closer until he was only an arm’s length away. İlsu could see the faint scar on his forearm—the one she had made with her knife years ago.

“Remember this, İlsu,” he murmured. “Every smile you show in public, every polite word, every compliant nod—you do for her. You are my wife in the eyes of the world. In this room, you are my hostage.”

Her fingers dug into İpar’s shoulders. The girl trembled.

“And if I stay silent?” İlsu asked, voice low. “If I endure? What then?”

“Then your sister lives,” Jian said simply.

He turned away, the red wedding candles painting his shadow long on the wall.

“Sleep, Princess,” he added, almost as an afterthought. “Tomorrow you begin your new role.”

That night, when Ilsu finally lay down on the edge of the bed, as far from Jian as the space allowed, she did not sleep.

She stared at the carved ceiling and thought of the steppe, of Mojilian’s warm hands on her shoulders, of Tuñuquq’s lectures about never, ever trusting the Tang.

She thought of her little sister’s small hands clinging to her own.

She thought: I wish he were different. I wish the man beneath this cruelty were someone I could respect.

Then she remembered the look in Jian’s eyes and knew that she was wishing for something that did not exist.

Homesick

Days in the Tang palace were made of silk and stone.

Silk: the smooth, expensive clothes she was forced to wear, the polite phrases whispered at feasts, the gentle, careful kindness of the Empress, who took her hand and spoke to her as if she were something fragile but valuable.

Stone: the walls she could not cross, the guarded outer gates, the cold glances of ministers who saw her as a threat, the weight of Jian’s eyes watching her every move.

He treated everyone else with a measured, almost distant courtesy. To visiting envoys he was all careful words and restrained smiles; to soldiers he was a calm commander, giving orders without raising his voice.

Only with her did his composure turn to cruelty.

He never raised a hand to her. That would have been too obvious, too easy. Instead, he used silence as a

whip, cold words as cuffs.

"You will join me at the council tomorrow," he would say. "Your presence will show unity."

"I am not your pet," she would answer.

"On the contrary," he would reply smoothly. "You are exactly that. Well-fed and kept on a leash, so my father can show you off to the northern envoys."

When she dared question a policy that hurt Ashina traders, he listened politely—and then had the decree enacted anyway, making sure she saw the seal fall.

"Did you think being my wife would give you power?" he asked quietly one night, finding her alone in the garden. "You misread the game, İlsu."

"I thought... marriage meant something," she said, hating the crack in her voice.

"It does," he replied. "It means you are tied to me when I choose to pull the rope."

Sometimes his cruelty was quieter.

At feasts, he complimented other women's skill at poetry within her hearing and praised the musicians but never once acknowledged the Ashina melody she hummed under her breath.

When she fell from a horse one afternoon in the inner courtyard— unused to the high Tang saddle—he was there in a heartbeat, eyes wide. For a moment, she saw naked worry on his face.

"I am fine," she said, more harshly than necessary, embarrassed. "It is a scratch."

Later that night, he called in the physician and had him examine her bruised ankle in front of him, asking detailed questions about tendon damage as if she were a valuable horse he refused to see injured.

"Do you care because you need me alive for your plans," she asked bitterly when they were alone, "or because you would be bored without someone to torment?"

“Do you think those answers are different?” he said.

She hated him.

She also hated herself for the small, traitorous part of her that noticed how his eyes softened for a heartbeat when she laughed with two young maids. For the way his hand hovered over her back when they walked down a particularly steep stair, never quite touching, but there.

Every kindness he showed to others became another barb.

He greeted the Empress with genuine warmth. He spoke gently with a servant who spilled wine, saying, “It is only wine,” while İlsu watched from the side and thought, Why can’t you be that man with me?

At night, alone in the gilded cage of their shared room, she lay awake and thought of the steppe.

She remembered dawn light on short grass, Mojilian’s voice teasing her awake, Tuñuquq’s rough cough in the distance, the smell of kumis and smoke.

She remembered falling off a wild young horse and how Mojilian had knelt beside her, checking every bruise with serious eyes, then helped her up and said, “You fell. Now you stand. That is how we learn.”

She remembered the way he had shielded her from İlterish’s temper when she disobeyed, how he had told her stories when she cried over İpar’s disappearance, how he had looked at her on the last morning and promised, “If he hurts you, I burn them all.”

Sometimes the homesickness came so strong it felt physical—a hollow ache under her ribs.

One evening, as moonlight spilled into the garden, she stood under a plum tree and whispered Mojilian’s name under her breath like a prayer.

In the distance, beyond mountains and deserts, a brother sat in his own camp under foreign stars and felt his chest tighten for no clear reason.

The Lesson of the Smile

The next morning, the palace woke to rain.

Fine threads of water slipped from the eaves, blurring the inner courtyards behind a silver curtain. Servants hurried along stone paths with their heads bowed under oiled paper umbrellas.

İlsu sat at the dressing table while two maids arranged her hair, pinning it up with heavy jade hairpins that felt like small iron stakes in her skull.

“Too tight,” she said in halting Tang. “I can hardly move my head.”

One maid glanced nervously toward the door. “His Highness said today’s court is important, Your Highness,” she murmured. “He asked us to make sure you look... proper.”

Proper.

That had become Jian’s favorite word.

He arrived just as they finished, the dark of his robe drinking the pale morning light. He studied her in the polished bronze mirror as if she were a painting he had commissioned.

“You look almost like you belong here,” he observed.

“Almost,” she echoed coldly.

He stepped closer and, without asking, tilted her chin with his fingers. The grip was firm, just on the edge of painful.

“You will stand beside me today,” he said. “You will smile when my father speaks of peace. You will bow when the ministers toast your courage. You will not mention chains or lost steppes or the way you hate this place.”

“If I smile, it will be for the Empress,” she replied, pulling her chin free. “Not for you.”

He watched her, expression narrowing. “This is not about what you feel,” he said calmly. “It is about what

they see. Out there, you are not a woman. You are a sign. A banner with a beating heart.”

“A banner,” she repeated, anger rising. “An object.”

“Exactly,” he said.

The simple cruelty of the word stole her breath for a moment.

“If you want a banner,” she managed, “hang a piece of cloth. It will obey you more.”

He gave a soft huff of amusement, the closest thing he had ever made to a laugh in front of her.

“Cloth cannot bleed,” he said. “Cloth cannot tremble in fear or stand firm in defiance. A living banner moves men’s hearts. The court must see that you have bent. That is how peace holds.”

“And if I do not bend?”

His eyes hardened. “Then they will see that my threat was empty,” he said. “And I do not allow emptiness in my word.”

She knew what threat he meant. İpar, her small hands, her wide eyes.

İlsu swallowed.

“What do you want me to do, exactly?” she asked, voice flat.

He leaned down, his lips close to her ear. From the outside, it must have looked like a tender whisper from husband to wife.

“You will play the grateful bride,” he said. “You will answer when spoken to, but only with the phrases I taught you. No speeches about the steppe. No sharp questions about raids. You are a flower today, not a wolf.”

“And if I say the wrong thing?”

“Then I remind you,” he said.

His fingers brushed lightly against the delicate bones of her wrist. A shiver ran through her, not from attraction but from the cold awareness of how easily those fingers could tighten.

“Do not test me in front of them,” he added softly. “I can smile with one side of my face and cut with the other.”

In the great hall, under painted dragons and carved beams, Iisu stood at his side.

The Emperor spoke of unity. Ministers recited verses about harmony between plains and empire. Foreign envoys watched with sharp, calculating eyes.

When cups were lifted in toast, Jian’s hand settled on the small of Iisu’s back—light, possessive. A touch that looked protective to those who did not know better.

“Say it,” he breathed without moving his lips. “The line in Tang.”

She forced her tongue around the words he had drilled into her:

“I am honoured... to be a bridge between our peoples.”

Her accent twisted the vowels. A few ministers smiled indulgently, as if at a clever child attempting poetry.

Jian’s fingers pressed a little harder into her spine.

“Again,” he murmured. “Louder. So they all hear.”

She repeated it. Each word tasted like sand.

When the hall echoed with polite applause, Jian smiled down at her as if pleased.

Only she could feel the steel hidden in that smile. Only she knew that if she had refused, if she had let her anger slip through, it would not have been her reputation he used as a bargaining chip later.

It would have been Ipar.

That night, when the doors closed and the candles were lit, he poured himself wine.

“You did well,” he said, as if praising a horse for not throwing its rider. “They now believe you are content. That is useful.”

“I am glad my performance satisfied you,” she said bitterly.

“It is not about my satisfaction,” he replied. “It is about control.”

He raised the cup to his lips, then paused.

“Do you know why banners are placed at the front of the army?” he asked.

“To catch arrows,” she snapped.

He smiled faintly. “And to show the soldiers where to look,” he said. “You are at my front, İlsu. Do not forget that.”

The Cup of Ashes

The cruelty, she realized, was rarely loud.

It came in small moments, sharpened like knives hidden in silk.

The first time it showed itself in front of others, it was over something foolish: a cup of fermented mare’s milk.

The Empress had arranged a small gathering in an inner pavilion, inviting a few high-ranking ladies to meet the Ashina princess in a quieter setting. It was, İlsu suspected, a genuine attempt to make her feel less alone.

Plates of delicate cakes and porcelain cups of fragrant tea lined the table. Conversation flowed about poetry, silk patterns, temple visits.

"Your Highness," the Empress said kindly, "I asked the kitchens to prepare something from your homeland. It may not be exact, but perhaps close."

A servant stepped forward with a wooden cup, the smell immediately familiar—sharp, sour, comforting.

İlsu's chest tightened. "Kimiz," she whispered in Ashina.

"It is not proper to serve such a drink at court," one lady muttered behind a polite hand.

"It is proper today," the Empress answered, eyes cool. "Our daughter-in-law comes from the steppe. The palace should learn the taste of her world, at least once."

The servant offered the cup to İlsu first.

She hesitated only a heartbeat before accepting. The weight of the wood in her hands felt like a rope thrown across an impossible distance.

She raised it to her lips.

"Stop."

The word cut across the pavilion.

Jian stood in the doorway, still in armor from training, hair damp with sweat. He had not been invited, but no one dared tell him so.

All eyes turned to him.

"Jian," the Empress began, a faint warning in her tone.

Jian's gaze stayed on İlsu. "What are you drinking?" he asked in Tang, though he knew perfectly well.

"Kimiz," she answered quietly. "From my homeland."

"In a Tang palace," he said, voice light, almost amused. "How generous of us."

He walked forward, boots ringing on the floor, and took the cup from her hand.

To an outsider, it might have looked like a playful husband stealing a sip from his wife.

He lifted it, sniffed, then tilted it so the liquid spilled into the nearest brazier.

The sour-sweet smell vanished under a hiss of steam.

İlsu stared at the empty cup.

A muscle jumped in her jaw.

“What are you doing?” she asked, voice steady only because she forced it.

His eyes never left hers.

“Teaching,” he said. “We do not drink steppe spirits at imperial tables. Not when the court is still learning to see you as... refined.”

“So my customs are not refined?” she demanded.

“Not here,” he answered calmly. “Here they are crude. Foreign. Dangerous.”

A faint flush rose in a few ladies’ faces. The Empress’s gaze sharpened, but she said nothing—yet.

“You speak of peace,” İlsu said quietly, “but you pour my home into the fire.”

Jian’s lips curved in a half-smile. “Your home,” he said, “sent arrows into mine. Consider this a small balance.”

He set the cup upside down on the table, the wooden rim making a dull sound.

“Wine will be brought,” he announced lightly to the watching women. “Something more fitting to celebrate harmony.”

The Empress's fan stilled.

"That was... unnecessary, Jian," she said.

"On the contrary," he replied smoothly. "We cannot have the court whispering that our new princess still clings to barbarian tastes. We must polish her."

Ilsu felt every gaze on her.

She knew what image she presented: back straight, face blank, hands still. She would not give him the satisfaction of seeing her shake.

But something inside her cracked.

Later, when the pavilion had emptied and even the Empress had retired, she walked alone to the brazier.

The scent was gone. Only blackened embers remained.

"So," she murmured in Ashina, "this is what it means to be polished."

She did not notice Jian watching from the shadowed doorway.

His face was unreadable.

He told himself he had done the right thing, that every small humiliation now would make her easier to wield later.

Still, as he walked away, the image of the empty upside-down cup followed him like a ghost.

The Wolves Without Names

Weeks blurred into each other.

Sometimes Ilsu lost track of which day of the cycle it was, which festival was approaching, which set of robes she was supposed to wear. Every decision seemed already made for her: what she ate, where she sat, when

she appeared in public.

When she tried to choose for herself, Jian reminded her how limited her circle really was.

It began with her language.

One evening, İlsu sat with İpar in a small inner courtyard, away from the echoing corridors. The younger girl traced patterns on the stone floor with a stick while İlsu braided her hair.

“Tell me again,” İpar begged, “about the white foal Mojilian gave you.”

İlsu smiled, the expression sudden and genuine. “It was not white, it was grey,” she corrected in Turkish. “But the dust made it look white as snow. I fell the first time I tried to mount it. He laughed so hard he—”

“Speak Chinese in the palace.”

Jian’s voice cut through the soft dusk.

He stepped into the courtyard, sleeves rolled, a scroll still tucked in one hand. A few guards stood at a distance, pretending not to listen.

“We are alone,” İlsu said. “With my sister.”

“You are never alone,” he replied. “Walls have ears. Servants have tongues. If they hear foreign words, rumours grow.”

“It is our mother tongue,” she said.

He looked at İpar, who was shrinking into herself.

“Do you understand my words?” he asked her, switching to Turkish.

İpar nodded tentatively. “Yes.”

“Then you will answer me in Tang,” he said coldly. “From now on. Both of you.”

She looked confused, eyes filling. "But... I don't know all the words."

"Then learn," he said.

He turned back to İlsu. "If you insist on howling in your wolf speech, do it inside your head. I will not have it echoing through my halls."

"Your halls," she repeated. "Not ours. Not even mine, though I live in them."

"Correct," he said. "Nothing here belongs to you but what I allow."

Her fingers tightened in İpar's hair. The girl winced.

"This is cruelty for its own sake," İlsu said in Tang, each syllable clipped. "You gain nothing from this."

"On the contrary," he answered. "I gain silence. Control. A buffer against your brother's spies."

"You think Mojilian needs spies to know you are cruel?" she snapped. "He would see it in one glance at your face."

"Perhaps," Jian said. "But he will not hear his sister whispering battle secrets in camp-tongue to servants who might sell them."

He took a step closer, dropping his voice.

"Remember," he said softly. "Every word you speak, every look, every sigh—they all pass through my nets. You may forget yourself. I do not."

The threat was not shouted. It did not need to be.

After he left, a heavy silence fell.

İpar picked at the end of her braid. "I... like our old words," she said quietly. "They feel like... home."

“So do I,” Ilsu replied.

She looked at the barred windows, the high walls, the guards beyond.

“Which is why he wants them dead,” she added, more to herself than to her sister.

That night, when a maid greeted her in hesitant Ashina as she had done for weeks, Ilsu saw the shadows behind the girl—the guards who had been listening since Jian’s order.

“Speak Chinese,” Ilsu said tiredly. “For your own sake.”

The girl’s face fell.

In that moment, Ilsu understood a new layer of Jian’s cruelty.

He was not simply punishing her.

He was stripping her of tools—words, memories, small harmless comforts—until all that remained between them was what he controlled.

Not a wife.

Not even an enemy.

Something more like a carefully collared wolf.

The Mirror and the Rope

The worst scene did not begin as a fight.

It began with a dress.

The imperial tailor had prepared a new robe for Ilsu to wear at a diplomatic feast. It was a deep, formal red,

embroidered with subtle dragon motifs—not quite Ashina, not fully Tang. An in-between thing, like her.

When she put it on, she caught sight of herself in the mirror and froze.

The girl staring back looked nothing like the rider on the steppe she remembered. No wind-tangled hair, no dust on her boots. Just heavy silk, pinned hair, painted lips.

“Do you like it?” the maid asked brightly.

“No,” she said.

She did not realize Jian had entered until the maid fell silent and bowed.

He came to stand behind her, gaze sliding over the reflection. For a strange, brief moment, his expression softened, almost as if he were struck by the sight.

“You look...” He stopped himself. His jaw tightened. “Appropriate,” he finished.

“I look like something you can parade,” she said.

“That is the idea,” he replied.

She turned to the maid. “Bring me my blue riding coat. The simple one.”

The woman paled. “Your Highness, this is for—”

“Stay,” he ordered. She froze in place.

İlsu swung towards him. “I will not wear this,” she said, plucking at the brocade. “I am not one of your silk dolls.”

He stepped closer until there was barely a breath between them.

“You seem to misunderstand,” he said softly. “This is not a choice I offered.”

“Everything about this life is a choice you stole,” she shot back. “My home, my freedom, my language, now my clothes—what next? Will you choose when I am allowed to breathe?”

“If I could, I would,” he answered without humour. “You breathe too much fire into rooms that should be calm.”

“I am not your property,” she said.

He studied her in the mirror, his face calm while hers trembled.

“Look,” he said.

She refused.

He grabbed her jaw—not hard enough to bruise, but hard enough to force her head forward until she faced the reflection again.

“There,” he said. “What do you see?”

She met her own gaze. “I see a prisoner,” she said.

“I see leverage,” he corrected. “A weapon my father cannot disarm, that Ilterish cannot call back. A bond Mojilian cannot cut without bleeding his own honour. That is what you are here.”

“You speak of me as if I were a sword,” she whispered.

“You are sharper than one,” he said. “And like a sword, you belong to the hand that holds you.”

Something in her finally snapped.

“Then break me,” she hissed. “You already have. I am tired of your games. You want me to bow? To smile? To pretend I do not hate you? You threaten my sister every time I breathe. You throw my birth into the fire. You poison my tongue. For what? For a vengeance built on lies your father told you?”

His fingers tightened. “Be careful, İlsu.”

"No," she said, breathing fast. "You be careful. There is only so much you can cut before nothing is left to shape. You think you can control me forever? You think you can erase the steppe from my bones?"

He leaned down, lips by her ear.

"I do not need to erase it," he murmured. "I only need to tie a rope to it. Every time it pulls, you feel the noose close."

He released her and picked something up from the table.

For one sickening heartbeat she thought it might be an actual rope.

It was a piece of silk cord, crimson, thin and elegant.

He looped it around her wrist, knotting it loosely.

"A reminder," he said. "When you stand at my side tonight, when foreign eyes weigh you, when ministers whisper, you will remember this: every step you take is because I allow it. Try to walk away, and you feel the tug."

He pulled lightly.

The silk bit into her skin.

She tore it off as soon as he left, fingers shaking, and threw it into the brazier.

The smell of burned silk filled the air.

She did not cry.

Not then.

Hairline Cracks

The fever came as winter's edge brushed the city.

İlsu woke one morning with her head heavy, her body aching. The world swam when she tried to stand. Chills chased heat across her skin.

"You are ill," the maid whispered, touching her forehead. "We must tell His Highness."

"No," İlsu said, teeth chattering. "He will think I am weak."

The maid looked torn. "If we do not call the physician—"

"Call the Empress," İlsu whispered. "Not him."

The Empress came swiftly, her own cloak thrown hastily over a simple robe. She ordered more blankets, a brazier, medicinal teas. Her cool hand on İlsu's forehead was gentle.

"You burn," she murmured. "This palace has too many drafts."

"If the walls were lower," İlsu muttered, "the wind would pass through, not settle."

The Empress smiled faintly. "Even ill, you make poetry."

Later, when the fever had risen higher and İlsu's thoughts came in broken waves, she did not notice when Jian entered.

He had been informed anyway. There were too many eyes, too many mouths. Nothing stayed hidden from him long.

He stopped just inside the door, watching.

The girl on the bed did not look like the polished banner he had crafted. Her hair was loose and damp with sweat. Her face, usually so controlled, was unguarded, lips parted in a shallow breath.

She muttered something in Turkish, words tumbling together.

He caught one name.

“Mojilian... don't let... they'll... take...”

Her hand twitched on the blanket as if reaching for reins.

Something twisted painfully in his chest.

“How bad is it?” he asked the physician, voice clipped.

“A fever, Your Highness,” the man said nervously. “If it does not break in two nights, it may turn dangerous.”

“What caused it?” Jian demanded.

“Exhaustion, perhaps,” the physician said carefully. “The change in climate. Stress. The princess carries much weight for one so far from home.”

Jian's jaw tightened. “Give her the best herbs,” he ordered. “Send for more if needed. If she dies, I will have your head.”

The man bowed repeatedly and fled to prepare another decoction.

When they were alone, Jian moved closer.

He sat on the edge of the bed, watching her face.

Her brows were drawn together, as if even her dreams were full of arguments.

“You fight even in sleep,” he said quietly.

She turned her head slightly, as if hearing him from far away.

“Don't...” she whispered. “Don't... chain...”

He closed his eyes briefly.

"I already did," he muttered. "That is the problem."

For hours, he sat there, refusing to leave, snapping at any servant who suggested he rest. He changed the cloth on her forehead himself when it grew hot. He held the cup of bitter tea to her lips when she stirred enough to drink.

Once, when she coughed until her whole body shook, he reached out without thinking and took her hand.

Her fingers grasped his like a drowning person clutching the nearest branch.

For a heartbeat, his mind split.

On one side: the boy holding Liu as she went still, the vow he had made on blood and ice.

On the other: the man listening to Iisu's ragged breath, realizing that if she stopped, the palace would fall unnervingly silent. What is happening to him?

His shell cracks whenever he sees her. Isn't she supposed to be the enemy he has to hate with all his heart? Isn't she the leverage he takes his hatred out on?

He knows his motivations is being faltered, and yet he is too afraid to admit it. Her beauty, her elegance, her determination, her resilience, her stubbornness, the way she bravely challenges him despite her situation, the dimples showing when she smiles at the Empress... Her everything replays in his head no matter how hard he keeps pushing the images away. This is wrong. He needs to get a grip. Is he by any chance...? No. Never. But what if?...

He silences the voices doubling his doubts. If there is one thing he doesn't need, it is hesitation. He cannot doubt his hatred. He can't risk it evolving into something else which he fears naming. He'll see her less if he needs to. He'll tire himself out working until he falls asleep on his desk. Who even is she? She is nothing. He doesn't need all these so-called measures to avoid her presence. Her presence or absence means a big whole nothing.

He tells himself. He lies himself.

She moves a little, making a small sound.

He turns back to reality as she mutters. All his lies and denial became even more pathetic as his face takes the shape of a worried man.

“Don’t die,” he heard himself say, voice hoarse. “Do you hear me? You do not have my permission to die.”

The words startled him.

My permission.

Even now, he was framing her life in terms of his control.

Disgust curled in his stomach.

When the fever finally broke in the grey light of early morning, relief hit him so fiercely he had to grip the bedframe to steady himself.

She blinked up at him, eyes heavy.

“You look terrible,” she croaked.

He gave a weak huff of breath. “You always say the kindest things,” he answered.

“You... stayed?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” she asked, genuine confusion in her voice.

He opened his mouth.

Because I need you alive for my plans., the old answer rose automatically.

Because I can't lose you. That was the next layer.

Because if you died, everything I've done would taste like ash. That was closer to the truth.

He closed his mouth again.

"Because I do not like unfinished things," he said instead. "Sleep."

As she drifted back into slumber, something like shame settled over him like a cloak.

He had been terrified of losing her, and not only because she was a useful hostage.

That realization unnerved him more than any battle.

He rose abruptly and stalked out into the corridor.

A guard glanced at his face and looked away quickly, as if the prince's expression was something that could blind.

Jian walked until his legs ached, trying to outrun the feeling.

He did not succeed.

The Night of Sobs

He did not know what the sound was.

It was late—so late even the night guards were fighting to keep their eyes open. Moonlight painted the courtyard in silver. The braziers in the hallways burned low.

Jian sat at his desk in the adjoining study, papers spread before him. Reports from the northern borders, lists of grain shipments, a letter from a distant general requesting more horses.

His eyes moved over the characters, but his mind was elsewhere.

On a feverish girl breathing raggedly.

On a wooden cup of kimiz hissing into fire.

On a silk cord burning in a brazier.

On his own reflection in the mirror behind İlsu, eyes cold enough to crack glass.

He poured himself wine, then pushed it away untouched.

From the bedchamber came a small sound.

He almost missed it.

Not the creak of a board or the rustle of covers. Something thinner, rawer. A breath sucked in and trapped. A muffled hitch.

He went still.

Another sound followed—choked, quickly smothered. Like someone pressing a hand over their own mouth.

He rose without thinking.

The door between study and bedchamber was slightly ajar. He moved quietly, habit from war.

The room was dark save for one dying candle. Shadows pooled in the corners.

İlsu lay on her side, back to the door, shoulders drawn tight. He thought at first she was asleep.

Then he saw her hand.

It was pressed against her mouth, fingers shaking.

Her shoulders jerked gently. Each movement was followed by a faint, strangled sound.

Tears glistened where the thin light touched her cheek.

She thought he was asleep, no doubt. She thought she was alone.

"Stop," he told himself.

He knew he should turn around. Return to his desk. Pretend he had heard nothing.

But his feet carried him forward.

"İlsu," he said softly.

She froze.

A heartbeat later she scrubbed at her face, pushing herself up to sit. By the time she turned toward him, her expression was almost composed.

Almost.

Red rimmed her eyes. Tear tracks still shone in the candlelight.

"What is it?" she asked, voice scratchy. "Another lesson? Another threat? Have I breathed too loudly in my sleep?"

The bitterness in her tone cut deep.

"You were crying," he said, as if she did not know.

She lifted her chin. "I do many things you do not approve of," she answered. "Add this to the list."

"Why?" he asked before he could stop himself.

She laughed once, the sound sharp and humorless. "Why do people cry, Jian?" she asked. "Because they are happy? Because they enjoy their cages?"

"Because of everything," she said. "Because I dream of grass under my feet and wake to stone. Because my brother's laughter is a memory instead of a sound. Because my sister flinches when you enter a room. Because I cannot open my mouth without measuring every word through your threats."

Her voice cracked.

"Because I look in the mirror and I do not know who I am anymore," she whispered. "Am I Ilterish's daughter? Mojilian's sister? Your hostage? Your wife? Your decoration? Or just a rope you like to pull to see how hard I jerk?"

He flinched.

She saw it and leaned forward, eyes bright with anger and wet with tears.

"You asked," she said. "There is your answer. Are you satisfied?"

"No," he said. The word came out rougher than he intended.

"Then perhaps threaten me again," she suggested coldly. "Tell me what you will do to İpar if I dare to dream of home. That usually quiets me."

He had no reply.

For the first time, he saw himself through her words not as an avenger or a strategist, but as a man standing over a woman in a dark room, wielding her fear like a toy.

It was a sickening view.

"I..." He stopped.

She waited, arms wrapped around herself.

"I never wanted you," he said slowly, "to feel... lost in who you are."

She laughed again, softer, sadder. "What did you expect me to feel?" she asked. "Grateful? Honoured to be your living weapon? To smile with my mouth while my eyes die a little every day?"

Silence stretched between them.

He took a small step closer.

"Ilsu," he said, using her name without title.

"Do not say my name as if you own it," she snapped. "You own enough."

He stopped.

Somewhere deep, under layers of anger and habit, something broke.

He saw Liu's face—the last time, eyes wide, blood on her lips. He had promised her that her death would not be for nothing.

He had twisted that promise into a whip.

Was this what she would have wanted? Her warm, mischievous sister-brother bond turned into cold games played on a stranger's back?

He doubted it.

"I have been... cruel," he said quietly.

"Do you want applause for noticing?" she asked.

"I have used your sister. Your fear. Your dignity," he continued, as if each admission were a stone he was prying off his own chest. "I told myself it was justice. Balance. That making you suffer balanced what your father did."

She stared at him.

“And now?” she asked.

“And now I am not sure what I have balanced,” he whispered. “Or if I have only added more weight to a scale already breaking.”

For a moment, his composure slipped.

“I hear you at night,” he said. “Even when you try to be quiet. I hear when you hold your breath to stop the sounds. I hear when you turn your face into the pillow so no one will know.”

His hands curled into fists at his sides.

“Do you know what it is like,” he asked, voice shaking, “to realize that you are the reason someone muffles their own sobs?”

She did not answer.

“Sometimes,” he went on, “when you look at me, I recognize it. It is the same way I look at my father when he justifies every life we take. As if I cannot decide whether to kill him or cling to him because he is all I have left.”

He let out a low, humorless breath.

“I hate it,” he said. “And I hate myself for willingly stepping into the role.”

Silence again.

The candle spat, then steadied.

“Do you expect me to feel sorry for you?” she asked at last. There was no softness in the question.

“No,” he said. “I expect nothing from you. You owe me nothing. Not pity. Not understanding. Certainly not forgiveness.”

He looked at her, seeing not the banner, not the rope, but a person he had hurt again and again because it was easier than facing the man who had set this path.

"I only—" His voice caught. He forced it onward. "I only needed to hear myself say it. So that when I change, if I can change, I remember exactly what I am changing from."

"Changing," she repeated sceptically.

"Yes," he said. "I do not know how. I am... clumsy with anything that is not war. But I cannot keep hearing you cry because of my choices and pretend it is righteous."

A long moment passed.

"You could start," she said slowly, "by not using ipar as a knife against my throat."

"Maybe," he whispered.

"And after that?" she asked.

He swallowed. "After that... I do not know. Perhaps I ask you what you want instead of telling you. Perhaps I listen. Perhaps I stop pouring your world into fire for the sake of pleasing men who will never be pleased."

She watched him, searching for a lie and, to her own surprise, not finding one.

"Words are easy," she said at last. "You wield them well. I will believe your change when I see it, not when I hear it."

"That is fair," he replied.

He took a slow step back, as if leaving a battlefield he had entered unarmed.

"Sleep, ilsu," he said. "I will... try to give you reasons to sleep without muffling yourself."

As he turned away, her voice stopped him.

“Jian.”

He looked back.

Her expression was unreadable, eyes still bright with tears, mouth set.

“I hate you with every fiber of my being,” she said. “Do not mistake this conversation for softness.”

A strange, bitter smile touched his lips. “I know,” he said.

When he closed the study door behind him, his hands were shaking.

He sat at his desk and stared at the ink-stained wood for a long time.

In the silence, the memory of her stifled sobs looped in his head, a sound he could not escape.

He had spent years feeding his hatred of the Ashina.

Now, slowly, painfully, he began to taste another hatred.

Not for her.

For himself.

And that hatred, he suspected, would be the one that broke him—or remade him—long before any enemy blade did.

Soon, he knew, something would snap.

Either he would tighten her cage until she shattered...

Or he would be the one to crack.

The night drew on.

Soon, very soon, he would test every vow he had just spoken—on the road, at the gate, with her life in his hands once again.

But that, the road and the gate and the desperate chase through lantern-lit streets, would come later.

For now there was only Jian at his desk, the ghost of Liu's laughter, the echo of Iisu's choked sobs, and the first sick, sharp spark of regret burning a hole where his certainty used to be.

The Escape

It took Iisu months to plan.

She said nothing to Ipar. The more her sister knew, the more danger Jian could squeeze from her.

Instead, Iisu watched. She learned the guards' patterns, when they yawned, when they grew lazy. She observed the kitchen servants' routes. She listened at doors when courtiers gossiped about festivals outside the palace walls.

She discovered that during the Lantern Festival, the city gates stayed open later. The palace guards, too, tended to slip an extra cup of wine on those nights.

That would be her night.

She stole clothing from a maid—plain, slightly too big. She cut her hair in the dark of the bathhouse, short enough to tuck under a hat.

The night of the festival, lantern light flickered red and gold over the city. Music drifted over the walls, mingling with laughter.

Jian had left early that evening, summoned to a military council. He had not looked at her when he left. She

had not looked at him either, afraid that if their eyes met, he would see something.

When the bells marked the hour before midnight, Ilsu slipped out.

Her heart hammered so hard she could feel it in her throat. Every shadow looked like a trap. But she moved the way Tuñuquq had taught her to move around sleeping camp guards as a child—steady, unhurried, like she had every right to be there.

At the outer wall, a tumble of old stones created a hidden foothold. She climbed, palms scraping, lungs burning.

At the top, she paused, looking back.

The palace spread behind her, roofs layered like waves, lanterns glowing. Somewhere inside those walls, Jian sat at a council table, pretending, always pretending.

For a moment, she imagined what it would be like if the man behind those walls were not her jailer. If he were someone she could ride beside on the steppe. If his eyes did not burn with old grief.

Then she shook the thought away like a bad dream.

She dropped down outside the wall and ran.

The streets were crowded with festival-goers. For once, her clothes did not mark her as foreign. She slipped through the crowd, keeping her head down, heading for the smaller west gate she had heard servants gossip about.

Almost free.

When the gate came into view, her breath hitched. Only two guards, half-distracted by a group of drunk scholars trying to impress a trio of girls.

She stepped into the shadow of a wagon, waited for the right moment—

A hand closed over her wrist.

"Going somewhere? You seemed to forget you're risking someone's life being a runaway. Are you a fool?"

Jian's voice slid down her spine like ice.

Fear filled her entirety, she turned slowly.

He stood half-hidden in the shadows, cloak thrown over simple armor, hair tied back. His expression was unreadable.

"How did you—" She swallowed the question. "You have men spying on me even in my own rooms."

"You are my most dangerous enemy," he said calmly. "Of course I do."

"Your enemy?" she echoed incredulously. "I am one woman alone in a foreign palace. What threat do I pose to you?"

"You are Ashina," he said. "You are Ilterish's daughter. Mojilian's sister. You are not nothing."

For a heartbeat, pain flashed across his face, too quick for most to see. Ilsu, watching him closely, caught it.

"You k- knew I would try to escape," she said quietly.

"Of course," he replied. "I know the look of someone who watches doors more than windows."

He feared this day. He was so terrified he'd lost her. Here he was again, throwing threats and using his one and only leverage in hand despite his promises of change. It's okay. If it were to keep her there, he could keep his role going. He tightened his grip, pulling her back into the shadow of the alley so no one would see.

"Let me go," she hissed. "If you ever had even a hint of honor, let me go. Keep your peace treaty. Tell them I died. Tell them anything."

"Honor? Not an ounce of it when it comes to you. I won't," he said.

"You won't," she shot back.

He leaned closer, eyes dark. "If I let you go," he said, "your brother rides to war. My father unleashes the armies. This fragile peace shatters. You think I fear their arrows? I fear what I will become when given free license to destroy. I'll bury everyone six feet underground if you are so willing."

"Right... Destruction is all you were ever meant for," she whispered.

He flinched as if she had struck him.

In that moment of distraction, she twisted, wrenching her arm free, and ran.

He cursed and lunged after her.

She burst out from the alley into the wider street. Lanterns swung overhead; music crashed into her ears. She shoved past merchants and drunk revelers, heading for the gate.

"Stop her!" someone shouted behind her, but she did not look back.

Her lungs burned. The gate loomed closer.

Then a horse reared in front of her, whinnying. She collided with its flank and went down hard on the cobblestones. Pain flared along her knee and up her side where she hit the ground.

For a moment, the world blurred.

Footsteps. Voices. The feeling of being lifted.

"Careful," Jian snapped. "She hit her head."

"Your Highness, should we take her to the dungeons?" a guard asked uncertainly.

Jian's gaze flicked to the guard, so sharp the man fell silent.

"No," Jian said. "She is the Crown Princess. She tripped. The festival is crowded. She will be taken back to her chambers."

“But—”

“Are you questioning my word?” Jian’s voice was soft, very soft.

The guard swallowed. “No, Your Highness.”

İlsu tried to push away from him, but his grip was iron.

“Let me go,” she rasped. “I would rather die on the road than live another day as your prisoner.”

His jaw clenched.

“Bring the physician to her rooms,” he told the guards. “And double the sentries at her door.”

He carried her himself, arms tight, as if she might disappear if he relaxed.

She could feel the tremor in his fingers where they pressed against her shoulder.

“You bleed,” he said, voice rougher than usual. “It is inconvenient.”

“It is just a scrape,” she said.

“It is not,” he snapped, then seemed to realize he’d raised his voice.

They walked in silence for a while.

“Why?” she asked finally, too tired to keep the question inside. “Why do you care if I bleed if you intend to break me anyway?”

He did not answer at once. When he spoke, his voice was low.

“I do not wish to watch somebody’s sister fall again. Not even you.”

The words twisted something in her chest, because they were the first ones he had spoken that sounded

entirely unmasked. He sounded vulnerable. He hated that. He added without hesitation, "Make no mistake. I heal you, I take care of you so that I can continue. I can continue counting the tears streaming down your face. I'll make sure you are paying the price of what you did today. Precisely."

What a liar he is. He can't risk losing her. She needs to heal as it breaks his once cold heart to see her hurt. He'll wear the mask of a ruthless man if it means she stays.

She didn't know. She shouldn't. To her, he is a monster. That is the only fitting image for a man like he is. For a brief moment, she thought he was genuine. What a fool she was. Her heart raced at the thought of "the price". She wishes to vanish, to disappear. With tears in her eyes, she let exhaustion drag her down.

From that night on, the walls of her world grew tighter. Jian, who had always been ruthless, became more obsessive.

He ordered screens removed from their chamber so no hidden doors could be used. He had the windows barred at night. He interrogated servants who had been kind to her, dismissed those he did not trust.

And yet, at the same time, he became more careful with her physical wellbeing. When she coughed in the cold, he had thicker blankets brought. When she mentioned in passing that she missed the taste of mares' milk, a hesitant cup of something similar appeared at breakfast three days later.

Cruel and caring. Cage and cushion.

If she had hated him before, she did not know what to call the tangle of emotions now.

For his part, Jian found no peace.

He lay awake at night, listening to her breathing on the other side of the bed, remembering how cold Liu's body had been in his arms.

He told himself he was protecting his revenge, his leverage, his fragile balance with Ashina.

But sometimes, when Iisu laughed despite everything—when a maid told a stupid story and she snorted, hand over her mouth, trying to hide it—something fragile cracked in his chest.

He did not want it to crack.

He needed the hatred. He had built his life on it.

Yet more and more often, when he looked at her, he did not see Ilterish's daughter only.

He saw a woman who walked proudly even when she was chained. Who comforted her terrified little sister at night, whispering steppe lullabies in a foreign palace. Who swallowed humiliation rather than risk another's life.

He wanted to hurt her because he blamed her blood for Liu's death.

He wanted to protect her because—because—

He did not finish that sentence.

He could not.

The Turning Blade

The assassination attempt came at the spring festival, when plum blossoms fell like snow over the temple courtyard.

By then, whispers had begun in the palace.

Some ministers resented the Ashina princess, seeing only danger in her presence. Others resented Jian's growing influence as peace brought him into more negotiations than ever.

Peace breeds its own enemies.

The Empress came to Jian privately one evening.

"They will try something," she said simply, hands folded in her sleeves. "You know how men fear what they

cannot control. They cannot control the Ashina. They cannot control you. That makes you both targets.”

Jian’s eyes narrowed. “Have you heard specific talk?”

“A servant left a letter where I could find it,” she said. “Do not ask from whom; you would want their head, and I would rather keep my informants alive. It spoke of an accident. A runaway horse during the temple procession. A foreign princess trampled in public. What a shame.”

Ice slid through Jian’s veins.

“We will not go,” he said.

“You must,” the Empress replied. “If you do not, they will find another stage. Better to face a trap you know than one you do not.”

He hated that she was right.

On the day of the procession, the sky was a clear, cruel blue. Pilgrims filled the temple grounds. Banners fluttered, bells chimed.

İlsu walked beside Jian, her face expressionless, dressed in Tang ceremonial robes that still felt like costume.

She did not know about the threat. He had not told her. He told himself it was because he did not want to frighten her. The truth was darker: he did not want her to see how much it mattered whether she lived.

When they reached the central courtyard, the priest began chanting. Pigeons scattered from the roof in a flutter of wings.

Jian’s hand never strayed far from the hilt of his ceremonial blade. His gaze swept the crowd, the rooftops, the lines of guards.

He saw it then.

A flicker of movement near the stables. A guard, not at his post. A horse being led too close to the crowd, eyes rolling white.

"İlsu," he said quietly. "Get behind me."

She frowned. "What—"

The horse broke free.

Someone had pricked it with a hidden blade. It bolted straight toward them, hooves striking stone like drumbeats.

The crowd screamed and scattered.

Jian shoved İlsu aside and stepped into the animal's path. It reared, enormous, and for a heartbeat he was looking up at two iron-shod hooves.

He dropped to one knee and drove his shoulder into its chest.

The impact rattled his bones. Pain exploded across his back. The horse screamed, stumbling. He grabbed its bridle, twisting hard, dragging its head down.

The beast crashed to the side, missing İlsu by a hand's breadth.

Jian's vision blurred.

"Your Highness!"

Guards rushed forward, seizing the horse, restraining it. Priests shouted prayers. The crowd surged forward then back.

Jian staggered to his feet, breath ragged. His knees threatened to give out.

"Are you hurt?" he demanded, turning to İlsu.

She stared at him, wide-eyed. "You... you jumped in front of it," she said, as if the idea were impossible. "You could have been crushed."

"But you are not," he said.

"Why?" she asked, voice shaking. "To protect your hostage? Your leverage?"

He opened his mouth—and closed it again.

His back screamed. His hands trembled. Somewhere deep inside, the memory of Liu's body on the ground rose like smoke.

"I do not want to watch... someone die," he said quietly.

Her face softened, then hardened again. "Haven't you already gotten used to it after taking lives of many?," she said.

Before he could answer, the Emperor's entourage reached them, demanding explanations. Guards dragged away the would-be assassin—a palace guard with too much coin in his belt and too little fear in his eyes.

Later, when Jian stood alone with his father in the inner hall, the Emperor's face was thunderous.

"You have made enemies on all sides," Wexian said. "Some wish the Ashina gone. Some wish you gone. Do you think your title protects you?"

"I think my usefulness does," Jian said tiredly. "So long as peace holds."

"And if peace fails?"

"Then I am exactly the weapon you raised," he replied. "I will be what you made me."

The Emperor studied him. "You truly mean to hold to this alliance?" he asked. "Even now, when she has tried to run, when her brother sharpens his blades beyond the border?"

"Peace gives us leverage," Jian said. "If it breaks, we lose control."

"And you," Wexian pressed. "You feel nothing for her? You do not let that foreign woman soften your

resolve?”

His heart stuttered.

“I feel exactly what I need to,” Jian said.

When he left his father, his path took him—almost against his will—to the small shrine he had built in a quiet wing of the palace.

He lit a stick of incense and placed it before the worn ribbon and old sketches that were all that remained of Liu.

“Sister” he murmured. “I did it. I stopped another arrow.”

Smoke curled upward, blurring his vision. His throat tightened.

“But I do not know who I am anymore,” he whispered.

Truth in the Dark

That night, Ilsa followed him.

She had never known about the small shrine. She had simply noticed that he disappeared to the same corridor after certain hard days, his shoulders tense, his gaze far away.

Curiosity and something more tangled drew her footsteps after him.

She stopped outside the room and listened.

His voice was low, hoarse. She could not make out the words, only the shape of grief.

When he left, she pressed herself into a shadowed niche, holding her breath. He passed without noticing her.

When the hallway was empty, she slipped into the room.

The shrine was small—a table, a cushion, a set of incense sticks. Above it, on the wall, hung a simple painting of a girl with laughing eyes, holding a wooden practice sword oversized for her frame.

Beneath it, a lock of hair tied with red silk.

İlsu moved closer, heart pounding.

“She was beautiful,” she murmured.

“She was a nuisance,” Jian’s voice came from the doorway. “Always stealing my boots. Always sneaking into the training yard.”

İlsu spun around.

He leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed, watching her.

“You followed me,” he said. It was not a question.

“You speak to her,” İlsu replied, gesturing towards the shrine. “You ask the dead for guidance. Yet you never once asked the living whether they bleed the way you bleed.”

His eyes narrowed. “What do you think you know of my bleeding?”

“You talk about your sister as if only Tang feel loss,” she said, anger rising. “As if no Ashina mother ever buried a child. As if no Ashina sister ever watched her brother ride to war and wondered if he would come back.”

He looked at her, and for once there was no mockery in his gaze. Only exhaustion.

“What would you have me say?” he asked. “That I am sorry for the men I killed? That I regret the raids I led? Regret does not bring them back.”

“No,” she said. “But it might make you stop hurting the living in their name.”

He flinched.

Silence stretched between them.

“My sister died protecting me from your people,” he said at last, voice very soft. “From your father’s arrow. I was a boy, and the last thing she did was smile. Do you know what that does to a person? To see someone you love die smiling, as if you were worth that?”

Her throat tightened. “My sister disappeared because of your war,” she said. “She spent years in a foreign palace thinking she was abandoned. Do you know what that does to a child?”

“Yes,” he said. “Because I watched her grow.”

That stopped her.

“You... watched her?”

“I did not keep her in a dungeon,” he said sharply. “She was raised in one of the inner courtyards, educated by palace tutors. My tutors. I told them to give her the best. She is innocent. A child.”

“But still a hostage,” İlsu said.

“Yes.” His jaw tightened. “I never pretended otherwise.”

She stared at him, a thousand questions colliding.

“Why tell me this now?” she demanded.

“Because today, I realized that if that horse had killed you, it would not have satisfied anything,” he said. “I would still wake at night with Liu’s name on my tongue. I would still hate your father. And I would also have your blood on my hands in a way I would not be able to live with.”

She swallowed. “You already have my blood on your hands.”

"I know," he said.

His gaze drifted to the shrine.

"Do you think she would be proud of what I've done?" he asked softly. "That I used a child as leverage? That I tied her death to an entire people?"

İlsu hesitated. "I do not know her," she said. "But from this picture... she does not look like someone who would want you to be chained to her ghost."

He laughed once, bitterly. "Chained," he repeated. "Yes. That is what it feels like."

A quiet knock interrupted them.

The Empress stepped in, eyes flickering between them and the shrine.

"I see you found one another here," she said. "Good. Then perhaps it is time you both knew something your father did not want known, Jian."

He stiffened. "Mother—"

"You think I did not stand in this hall when the messenger came?" she asked. "You think I do not remember the look in your father's eyes when he heard of the ambush?"

İlsu's heart thudded. "Ambush?" she echoed.

The Empress inclined her head. "The day Liu died was not as simple as they tell in battle songs," she said. "Your father had ordered an advance on an Ashina camp under flag of truce. He wanted to strike before they were ready, and he was so careless as to overlook the fact that your sister was going to come after you. He heard her when she insisted and did nothing to actually stop her from going. He was so focused on his war that..."

Jian went pale. "That is... not possible," he said. "He said— Why didn't he stop... Why—"

"He said they attacked first, and he would have stopped Liu if... He regretted he didn't. He truly did. He

suffered, but about the attack,” the Empress finished. “He said Ilterish betrayed us. It was easier to feed your hatred than your doubt.”

İlsu’s breath caught.

“İlterish always said there was treachery that day,” she whispered. “He swore he never aimed at a child. He swore Tang broke an oath.”

“They did,” the Empress said quietly. “Your father broke it. İlterish reacted as any war leader would. He seized the opening. He could not have known a foolish, brave little girl had slipped into the camp.”

Jian staggered back as if struck.

“All these years,” he said slowly. “All these years I—”

“Built your life on a half-truth,” the Empress said gently. “Your sister’s death is still real. Your pain is still real. But the story you were given was shaped to fit a dragon’s needs, not a boy’s healing.”

Silence.

The shrine’s incense smoke curled lazily, indifferent to human catastrophes.

İlsu watched Jian’s face change.

She saw the shattering—the moment when his hatred, carefully tended for fifteen years, cracked under the weight of new truth. She saw guilt flood in behind it, like water through a broken dam.

“Then I...” His voice broke. “I married you for revenge based on a half-truth.”

“You still... hurt me,” she replied, voice tight.

“Yes.” The admission tore itself from his throat. “I did. I used your sister. I wielded your fear like a weapon. I wanted to see your father suffer, your brother tremble. I wanted the Ashina to feel what I felt.”

He looked at her, eyes raw.

"And now?" she asked.

"Now," he couldn't finish.

He turned away, hand braced on the wall, shoulders shaking.

For the first time since she had met him, İlsu saw not Shenyuan, not the prince, not the general.

She saw a man who had been a boy once, holding his sister's body and believing that the only thing keeping her death from being meaningless was his rage.

"You cannot build a home on a grave," she said quietly. "Not even a home of vengeance."

He let out a strangled sound that might have been a laugh.

"What would you have me do?" he whispered. "Fall on my sword? Offer my head to your brother?"

She thought of Mojilian, of his promise to burn the world if she was hurt. She thought of İlterish's tired eyes. She thought of Tuñuquq shaking his head over stories that repeated themselves across centuries.

"No," she said slowly. "I would have you try something harder."

He turned, eyes red-rimmed. "Harder than dying?"

"Yes," she replied. "Living with what you've done."

He stared at her.

"I hate you," she said, voice low but steady. "I hate what you have done to me, to my sister, to my people. But I also see the man who threw himself in front of a horse today. I see the boy who still visits his sister's grave. I see someone standing at the edge of the abyss he built and deciding whether to jump. I don't know what to do with that."

She stepped closer.

"I do not forgive you," she said. "Never. But I... I will watch what you do next."

Something in his expression broke open.

"Is that... hope?" he asked, almost disbelieving.

"It is a reprieve," she corrected. "Do not confuse the two."

He let out a breath that sounded like a sob turned inside out.

"All right," he said. "Then please watch me."

Fire and Snow

News came from the north like a winter wind: sharp, cold, impossible to ignore.

Ashina riders had been seen closer to the border than in months. Scouts reported Mojilian's banner among them.

The court erupted in fear. Some shouted that the Ashina were preparing to break the alliance. Others argued that now was the time to strike first.

Jian stood in the war hall, listening.

He knew Mojilian would not move lightly. If the brother rode south, something had driven him.

Finally, a messenger with an Ashina scarf tied to his belt arrived at the palace, demanding audience.

He bore a letter.

My sister,

Word of your attempted “accident” reached us. We know they tried to break you like a horse in front of their gods.

We know Jian stood between you and death.

I head south not only as Tegin but as your brother. If they treat you as hostage, we break chains. If you stand as wife, we test whether their word holds steel or wind.

—Mojilian

Another letter, sealed differently, bore Tuñuquq’s neat, uncompromising script.

Tang,

You have harmed what is ours. You have also protected what is ours. Our judgement waits on your next move.

Choose wisely.

—Tuñuquq

Jian folded the letters, hands steady despite the tremor in his chest.

“I will ride to meet them,” he told the Emperor.

Wexian slammed his hand on the arm of the throne. “You would ride into their camp alone? Are you mad?”

“We will take an escort,” Jian said. “But I will ride at the front. If I stay in the palace, rumours will turn this into an excuse for coup or massacre. If I meet Mojilian, we decide the shape of this war—or this peace—between the two of us.”

The Emperor glared at him. “And if they kill you?”

“Then you will have your war,” Jian said quietly. “And you will have lost the only man who wanted to stop it.”

Wexian opened his mouth, then closed it.

"Go, then," he spat. "But if you dare die, I will drag your spirit back by its hair to scold you."

Jian bowed.

Before he left, he went to Ilsu's chambers.

She stood by the window, hair unbound, looking out over the palace roofs.

"Mojilian is coming," he said.

"I know," she replied without turning. "I felt it days ago. The wind smelled like home and war at once."

"I am going to meet him," Jian said. "To try to stop that war."

She finally turned, eyes sharp. "Why?" she demanded. "Because my brother threatens your peace? Because you wish to protect your father's throne?"

"Because I do not want your people to die for my lies," he said simply.

She swallowed.

"What will you tell him?" she asked.

"The truth," he said. "About the ambush. About the marriage. About what I did to you and Ipar."

"And if he draws his sword?" Ilsu asked.

Jian gave a faint smile. "Then we will finally have the duel he always wanted," he said. "Though I cannot promise I will have my usual focus."

"Because you will be thinking of me?" she said, tone half-mocking, half-afraid.

"Because I will be thinking of whether you will hate me less if I die for you," he answered frankly.

Her breath caught.

"Idiot," she whispered.

He blinked. "Pardon?"

"If you die, I get nothing," she said, stepping closer. "No restitution, no change, no proof that you were ever more than a monster. If you live... then perhaps I get to watch you suffer properly."

He almost laughed. He almost reached for her hand.

He did neither.

"I will come back," he said instead. "If only to give you that satisfaction."

As he left, Ilsa pressed her palm briefly to the window, watching him cross the courtyard with his escort.

She whispered his name once, the way she used to whisper Mojilian's when she was small and afraid of storms.

Then she turned away, because hope hurt more than anger.

The plain where Tang and Ashina met again was wide and open, under a sky the colour of cold steel.

On one side, Tang banners rippled like waves of red and gold. On the other, Ashina wolf-head flags snapped in the wind.

Jian rode forward from the Tang lines, armor plain but well-made, cloak snapping. From the Ashina side, Mojilian did the same.

They met in the middle with only a small circle of guards behind them.

Up close, Mojilian looked older than when Jian had last seen him. The lines around his eyes were deeper, but his gaze was clearer.

“So,” Mojilian said. “The Abyss Sword comes without a full dragon behind him. Brave. Or foolish.”

“Wise Tegin” Jian replied, bowing his head slightly. “We meet again.”

“You married my sister,” Mojilian said. “Then held her like a blade to my throat.” His eyes were deadly calm.

“Today you stand close enough for me to return the favour.”

Jian nodded. “I did,” he said. “And I stand here to tell you something you may kill me for knowing.”

He told him everything.

About the ambush. About the Emperor’s broken oath. About Liu’s death twisted into a convenient story. About İlsu’s arrival, the hostage game with İpar, the cruelty he had wielded like a shield.

Mojilian listened without interrupting, jaw tight, fists clenched on his reins.

When Jian finished, the silence felt heavy enough to crush bone.

“You expect me to thank you for your honesty?” Mojilian asked quietly. “To clap you on the shoulder and say we are brothers now?”

“No,” Jian said. “I expect you to want my head. Perhaps to take it.”

Mojilian’s gaze burned.

“İlsu cries for home in a palace she cannot leave,” he said. “My little sister, who used to chase goats barefoot, now walks on cold stone because you wanted to act out your grief on her life.”

“Yes,” Jian said again.

“İpar grew up thinking we left her,” Mojilian continued. “She learned a foreign tongue before her own. She thinks of you as her... what? Protector? Captor?”

Jian remembered the way İpar smiled at him like at a confusing big brother, half-love, half-fear.

"Both," he said softly.

Mojilian's fingers flexed on the reins. For a moment, it looked like he would draw his sword and end it.

Instead, he took a slow breath.

"If I kill you now," he said, voice dangerously calm, "Tang and Ashina burn. My father rides to war to avenge you. Your father rides to war to avenge me. The plains drink the blood of thousands."

"Yes," Jian agreed.

"If I let you live," Mojilian went on, "I must trust that the man who chained my sisters will unchain them. That Shenyuan will turn his edge against his own emperor when needed. That the boy who built an altar of vengeance can rebuild himself."

"Yes," Jian said a third time. "You must trust that. Or not. But I can offer you one thing I did not have fifteen years ago."

"And that is?" Mojilian demanded.

"A choice," Jian said.

He dismounted slowly, removing his sword from his belt.

He drove the blade into the ground between them and stepped back, hands open.

"I will go with you as hostage," he said. "Just me. No titles. No escort. You can show the plains that Tang's prince stands unarmed in Ashina hands. In return, you leave Iisu and Ipar in the capital to live as they choose. If they wish to return home, I will arrange safe passage. If they wish to stay, you will recognize their choice."

It was madness.

From the Tang line, generals shouted protests. From the Ashina side, warriors gripped their spears tighter.

Mojilian stared at him. "You offer yourself for my sisters' freedom," he said.

“Yes,” Jian said simply. “I am the one who brought them into this fate. Let the balance be corrected through me.”

Mojilian’s eyes narrowed. “Do you love her?” he asked suddenly.

The question hit like an arrow.

Jian closed his eyes briefly. When he opened them, the truth was there, raw and unhidden.

“Yes,” he said. “I love her. In a way that makes me regret every word I used as a weapon. Every night I let her cry in the room I locked. I cannot ask you to forgive that. But I can try to make sure she never cries like that because of me again.”

The words hung between them, heavier than steel.

Mojilian exhaled slowly.

“You are a fool,” he said softly. “You trapped yourself in your own abyss. Now you wish to climb out and offer your neck. Do you think that will ease her pain?”

“No,” Jian said. “But it might change what comes after.”

Mojilian looked past him, to the distant glimmer of the capital.

“İlsu is not a thing to be bargained for,” he said.

“No,” Jian agreed. “She is a person. Which is why I also leave the choice to her. If she says she never wants to see me again, I will go with you and never return. If she says she wishes me dead, I will kneel and you may do as you wish.”

He forced himself to imagine her saying those things. The images cut him like glass.

Mojilian studied him.

“You know,” the Ashina commander said quietly, “if this is some trick, if you are buying time—”

“I have spent fifteen years buying time with lies,” Jian cut in. “I am done.”

The wind tugged at their cloaks. Somewhere, a hawk cried.

Finally, Mojilian swung down from his horse.

He grasped Jian’s sword and yanked it from the earth.

“Keep your head on your shoulders for now,” he said. “We ride to the capital. If my sister asks for your blood, it will be cleanly.”

Jian bowed his head.

“Fair,” he said.

Choosing

When they returned, the city held its breath.

Ashina riders entered the capital under formal truce, wolf banners lowered but not bowed. Tang citizens watched from doorways and rooftops, faces a mix of fear and awe.

In the palace, Ilsu waited.

The Empress had told her enough for her heart to beat like a war drum—Jian’s confession to Mojilian, his offer as hostage, his open admission of love.

She did not know what to do with that last piece. Love, from the man who had hurt her the most.

When Jian entered the hall with Mojilian beside him, the air crackled.

He looked thinner, somehow. Tired. But there was a strange lightness in his gaze, as if he had set down a weight he had carried too long.

Mojilian's expression was unreadable.

"İlsu," Jian said, voice steady. "We have come to ask your judgement."

The entire court watched, forgetting for a moment that she was a foreign princess. In that instant, she was something more dangerous: a woman who held a prince's fate in her hand.

"What judgement?" she asked carefully.

"I offered myself to your brother as hostage," Jian said. "To balance the wrong I did. To show Tang's sincerity. I told him that whatever we decide next, it must begin with your choice."

He swallowed.

"If you want to go home," he said, "I will arrange it. You and İpar. With guards enough to make the route safe. The alliance may change, but I will not use you as chains again. If you want my death, I will kneel and give you my throat. If you wish to stay but never see me again, I will leave the capital. I will take a border post. You will be free of me."

Gasps rippled through the hall.

İlsu's hands shook.

"You think this fixes everything?" she asked. "That a handful of choices erases years of cruelty?"

"No," he said. "It does not erase. It only... begins something different."

She looked at him for a long time.

She saw all the faces he had worn: the merciless prince in their bridal chamber, the cold strategist in council, the man who had thrown himself in front of a horse for her, the boy in the shrine whispering to a ribbon.

She saw her own scars laid between them.

She thought of Mojilian's promise to burn the world for her. She thought of Tuñuquq's letters, Ilterish's tired hopes, İpar's laughter as she learned to braid her own hair.

She thought of the strange ache in her chest the night she thought Jian might die and realized she would not be relieved.

Slowly, she stepped forward.

"I will not ask for your death," she said. "Killing you would not restore my stolen years. It would only give me another ghost."

Relief flickered across his face—quick, then gone.

"I will not go home." Her voice steadied as she spoke. "Not yet. If I return now, I return as a story: the girl who was taken, used, and then sent back broken. I am more than that. I want to see what happens when a man tries to live with his regret instead of running from it."

She took a breath that felt like stepping off a cliff.

"I will stay," she said. "If you stay. Here. Beside me. Not as my jailer, not as my chain, but as... something we have yet to define."

Whispers swelled.

"You would forgive him?" someone murmured.

She turned her head slightly, voice carrying.

"I said nothing about forgiveness," she replied. "Forgiveness is not a door you open once. It is a road. He will walk it. I will walk it. Perhaps one day we will reach something like peace. Perhaps not."

Her gaze returned to Jian.

"But you will not use İpar again," she said. "Swear it. Here. Before both our peoples."

He dropped to one knee on the polished floor, not before the Emperor, not before his father, but before her.

"I swear," he said hoarsely. "On Liu's memory. On the sword I carry. On everything that remains unbroken in me. I will never again raise your sister as a weapon. Or you."

İpar, watching from behind a carved screen, burst into tears.

Mojilian exhaled, tension easing from his shoulders for the first time in months.

The Emperor, grudging and bewildered, nodded once. "So be it," he said. "Let this be written. Tang and Ashina will maintain peace. Our children will not be dragged onto battlefields for our mistakes."

Later, when the hall had emptied and the formalities faded, Jian and İlsu stood together in the quiet garden.

The plum tree petals fell around them like slow snow.

"I do not know how to be the man you deserve," Jian said softly. "I only know how to be the weapon they made."

"Then learn," she said. "You are good at learning strategies. Learn this too."

He gave a fragile smile. "You will be harsh with me," he guessed.

"Yes," she said. "But I will also be honest. And I will try to see the man you are trying to become, not only the one you were."

He reached out, stopping just before his fingers touched hers.

"May I?" he asked.

She looked at his hand for a moment.

Then she placed her own in it.

It was not a lover's gesture yet. It was an agreement. A promise to walk a jagged path together.

His fingers closed around hers, careful, as if afraid she might break.

“You will regret this,” he murmured, half-teasing, half-terrified.

“I regret many things already,” she answered. “At least this regret will be mine, chosen, not forced.”

He laughed—a low, surprised sound that felt like the first crack of spring ice.

As they stood there, hand in hand, caught between old wounds and uncertain hope, the wind shifted.

Far away, on the steppe, Mojilian looked up at the sky and smiled faintly, as if hearing his sister’s voice across the distance and finding peace in the fact that she had chosen her own road.

In the shrine, the incense burned low before Liu’s ribbon.

If the dead could see the living, perhaps she shook her head at her brother’s stubbornness, at the girl who dared to love and hate him at once.

Perhaps she felt that, finally, the arrow that had frozen his heart had begun to melt.

Not into forgetfulness.

But into something sharper, softer, more difficult.

Love, tangled with guilt. Vengeance, transformed into protection. Two enemies standing on the edge of an abyss and deciding, together, not to fall.

The battles and darkness awaiting Tang and Ashina were not over.

But for the first time in a long time, the story was no longer only about blood.

It was also about two people who had every reason to hate each other—and chose, painfully, slowly, to learn something else instead.