

GODDESS
CROWN

SHADE LAPITE

WALKER
BOOKS

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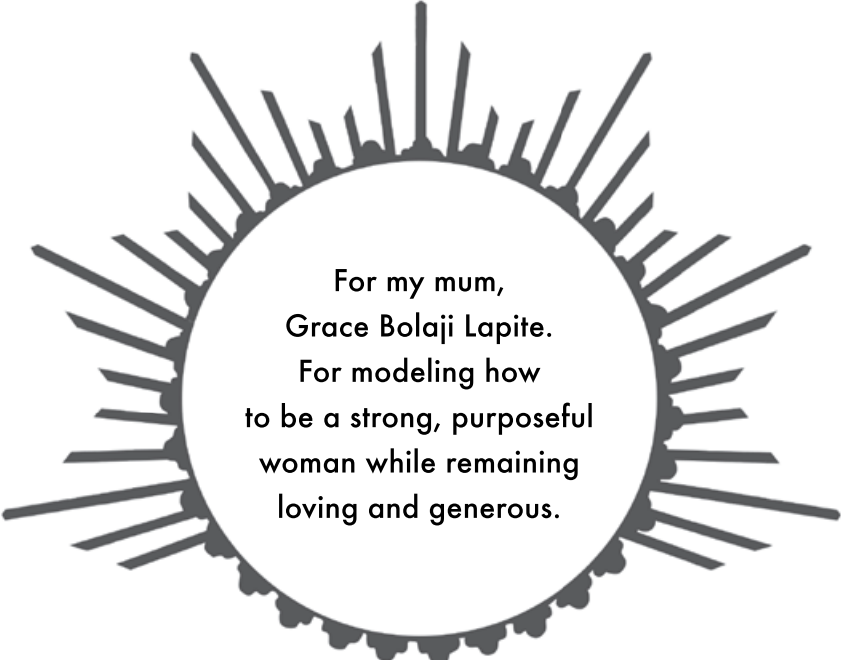
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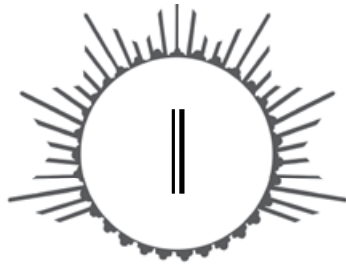
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A stylized sunburst graphic with a white circular center containing text. The sunburst is composed of numerous dark grey rays of varying lengths radiating from the center. The rays are arranged in a circular pattern, with some longer rays extending further out than others. The overall effect is that of a bright sun or a starburst.

For my mum,
Grace Bolaji Lapite.
For modeling how
to be a strong, purposeful
woman while remaining
loving and generous.



The Forest

The sun wouldn't set for another few hours, but evening came quickly in the forest, and Aunty had made Kalothia promise to be back at a decent time so they could enjoy her age-day meal. *This last one and I'm done here*, she promised silently.

The scent of loamy earth filled her nose and the warm air bathed her skin. It had been a beautiful day. As though the forest knew she would be leaving in a few hours and had put on a show to wish her well.

She braced her feet, sighted her arrow, pulled the rawhide string back, and released. The arrow sliced through the air. The hare keeled over, dead before it knew it had been hit.

Kalothia strode over to the body, whispered a prayer to the Goddess, thanking her for the blessing, then added the hare to a hunting bag that already contained two squirrels and a grouse. Her vervet monkey, Ye-Ye, swung down from a tree branch and landed in his favorite spot on her shoulder. She'd rescued him after his mother was killed by a snake when he was only a few days old. Under her doting care, he'd matured into a mischievous creature who never listened and never left her side.

“Are you done?” Clarit called from her perch on a boulder. She slapped at a mosquito and sighed.

“I am.” It comforted Kalothia to know she’d be leaving Aunty and Teacher with a fully stocked provision room. Though Aunty clicked her tongue and grumbled about the unseemliness of Kalothia hunting, they all knew there’d be little meat on the table if she didn’t. Teacher was unskilled at anything beyond his books, and Aunty’s simple traps only caught the smallest forest animals. Kalothia was glad to use her weapons training to supplement their meals, Goddess knew she’d never had to use the training to fight off intruders. She knew she was worrying unnecessarily; Clarit could also hunt when she was gone. In their practice combat sessions, her bodyguard wielded her cudgel with lethal precision. Kalothia had no doubt the woman could provide game for the table.

Except, there’d be no reason for Clarit to remain in the forest once Kalothia was gone, she reminded herself. Clarit would rejoin her army unit wherever they were stationed and probably breathe a sigh of relief that her annual three-month tour of duty protecting a minor royal in the middle of a strange forest were finally over.

“This way!” Kalothia called to Clarit, deciding on a shorter route back to the house.

Clarit grunted unhappily but followed.

When she’d been younger, Kalothia had enjoyed teasing her bodyguards by choosing the most difficult routes whenever she was allowed out of the house. She knew every log, every bush, every beehive, every alcove – it was impossible for her

to get lost. The delight of that had waned eventually. She'd grown tired of the forest she'd been forbidden to leave and that she was not allowed to traverse without an escort. She longed to visit the towns and villages she knew were nearby, but they were off-limits. "Only if you're attacked, and then you run and don't look back." Nahir had made her repeat the rule so many times.

Sixteen harvests and they'd never been attacked. Sometimes a brave outsider would venture into the forest, shaking and fearful, braced to encounter the dead souls that were said to live there. Most of the time it was just her, Aunt, Teacher, her bodyguard, and Nahir on his occasional visits.

Nahir.

Thinking of Nahir made her kick mindlessly at a tuft of grass and sigh. Would she see him before she left? He never forgot her age day, but there'd been so much trouble on the eastern border recently, he might be unable to leave. It was better this way.

She kicked at another cluster of grass. If he came, he'd ask probing questions and look at her with those eyes that saw too much. Clarit would tell him about the strange hunters who'd ventured so much deeper into the forest than usual a moon ago, and Nahir would start making paranoid sweeps of the forest and putting her through fighting drills. He took his job as head of her security under his father, Lord Godmayne, painfully seriously. It was actually ridiculous, as she'd told him many times. He was only three harvests older than her. She could still remember the lanky boy of thirteen harvests who'd

accompanied the series of stern-faced army men sent to manage her rotation of bodyguards. He'd tried to imitate his unsmiling seniors, but she could see his pleasure when they'd gone fishing and she demonstrated how to spear fish in the lake, or when they'd laid hog traps and caught one of the fat, fierce creatures.

Nahir had changed when he had passed the combat tests and become a captain at seventeen. By the time he was made head of her security, he had become quiet and sober with the weight of responsibility. She found she couldn't read him the way she once had. His world was so much bigger than hers, his concerns so numerous. She missed the boy he'd been and felt victorious whenever she managed to tease him out. But the last thing she needed on this age day was Nahir sniffing around, seeing far too much.

"You should be happy on your age day."

Kalothia jumped at the sound of Clarit's voice. The woman rarely started a conversation. Kalothia looked back at her.

"You've been quiet today," Clarit observed. "I can listen if you want to talk."

"I've reached sixteen harvests. I'm supposed to be reflective at such a milestone."

Clarit grunted again. Kalothia summoned up a smile. She did not want to trigger Clarit's concern. Kalothia began prattling about how they were running low on salt and how she hoped Nahir would bring some if he managed to make her age-day celebration so they could preserve the game she'd caught. She kept the steady stream of words flowing until they reached the compound gate.

The gate was overgrown with vegetation, impossible to find unless you knew where to look. She stepped aside so Clarit could enter first, waited the mandated minutes while Clarit did her checks, then followed her inside. The sandy ground was bathed in golds and reds, the evening sun streaming down into the clearing. The house stood at one end, a cluster of connected circular rooms made from red, sunbaked mud bricks and covered with thatched roofing. A vegetable patch sprouted cheerily beside it, and before it a long, rough-hewn wooden table had been set with goblets and bowls covered with squares of fabric.

Teacher wandered out of the hen house, a handful of eggs balanced precariously in his hands. He was a small, dark-skinned man with a shock of white hair he always forgot to comb and large spectacles. He stood in the compound and looked around as though he'd forgotten where he was heading, then catching sight of them, he smiled and called, "Welcome back! How was the hunt?"

Kalothia smiled in answer and ran to join him so they could stroll inside together. "Two squirrels, a grouse, and a hare," she boasted.

"Excellent work!" Teacher reached for the front door, jiggling the eggs dangerously. Alarmed, Kalothia dove forward to open it for him, certain Aunty would kill him if he dropped them.

Inside the house, the air was rich with spices, but there was no sign of Aunty. Kalothia breathed a sigh of relief. If she bathed and dressed quickly, Aunty might not mention her late

return. She dumped the bag of game on the parlor room table and hurried for the door.

“I said be back at a *decent* time!”

Kalothia jumped at the crack of Aunty’s voice. She winced, turning back slowly.

Aunty stood in the doorway to the provision room, dressed in a yellow kaftan with matching headscarf, one hand fisted on her hip.

Kalothia took her in: the small, round-faced woman who had fed, scolded, hugged, and cared for her since her birth. The fist on hip signaled swift action was required. She shot Aunty a sweet smile. “I’m just wondering, if I had to pour all my love for you into bottles, how many would I need? I don’t think there’d be enough.”

Teacher grinned.

Aunty chuckled then tried to hide it, remembering she was annoyed with her charge, but the smile hovered stubbornly at the corners of her mouth. “Your mouth is sweeter than sugarcane! Your mother was the—” She cut herself off, but it was too late. The playful mood dissipated.

Kalothia often thought there was nothing Aunty and Teacher would deny her – after all, they’d moved to the middle of the Faledi forest to care for her. Quite a change from the royal court, where they’d lived before. There was nothing they would refuse her, except the truth about where her parents were.

Silence sang through the room until Teacher nodded toward the corridor. “Hurry and wash up!” The eggs shifted in his precarious hold.

“Hey, la!” Aunty cried. “Put my eggs down immediately!”

Ye-Ye cried with delight and leaped off Kalothia’s shoulder to closely observe the endangered eggs. Kalothia smiled at Teacher and rushed off to bathe.



The mud walls had been absorbing heat all day, keeping the house cool. Now, as evening fell, they released the stored energy, warming the rooms, keeping the house a pleasant temperature. Kalothia took a refreshing cold bath. When she emerged, she found Aunty in the sleep room they shared, perched on the bed, fixing a hole in one of Kalothia’s dresses.

“What am I wearing?” Kalothia asked.

Only on her age day did she allow Aunty to indulge her desire to see her in dresses. The rest of the time she lived in the tunics and shokoto that Nahir brought her from the North, since the South didn’t make such items for women. Aunty pointed at the sky-blue dress she’d hung over a chair.

Kalothia oiled her skin with shea butter scented with lavender, then slid into the dress. She crouched so Aunty could button the back. Aunty hummed in satisfaction when Kalothia rose and the fabric fell elegantly to the floor. Dresses were nice enough to look at but decidedly impractical when you were planting in the garden, hunting, rethatching the roof, climbing trees, or any of the other things Kalothia liked to spend her days doing. She made an effort to tolerate the annual discomfort.

“Now sit and I’ll do your hair,” Aunty instructed.

Kalothia grabbed two wooden combs and a small looking glass from the table, then lowered herself to the handwoven floor mat, wedging herself between Aunty’s legs. Aunty worked deftly, her hands gentle and soothing as she unbraided the week-old cornrows, combed the knots out of Kalothia’s thick afro, then rebraided the hair.

When she was finished, she tapped Kalothia’s shoulder. “Let’s see you.”

Kalothia raised the looking glass and they both studied her reflection. Her dark red hair had been twisted into four thick cornrows that marched around her head like a crown. It was a style Aunty liked to do on her age day. As usual, Kalothia could see Aunty’s eyes misting and her mouth puckering as she tried to contain her emotions.

“Do I look so much like her?” Kalothia said. When she asked about her parents, she found the best approach was to do it gently, like a fisherman dangling bait to hook a catfish.

“Yes,” Aunty said. “If only she could see you.”

Kalothia touched the cool glass of the pendant that hung at her throat to calm herself. It was the only thing she had from her mother. Well, that and her coffee-rich skin, wide eyes, and full lips. She knew her red hair came from her father. These weren’t useful details. Having your parents imprinted on your face and hair was not helpful when you’d never met them and barely knew where to start the search to find them.

Aunty made a visible effort to shake off her melancholy. “One day, when your parents are no longer fearful of the

king, they'll come and get you. Now let's go and eat before the sun sets."

Kalothia trailed Aunty outside, trying not to feel bitter about the promises that never came to fruition, and the waiting that seemed to have no end. She had one last night with Aunty and Teacher. She didn't want to waste it feeling angry or wondering about her absent parents.

She'd lived in the forest for sixteen harvests, ever since her parents had fled the royal palace during what Aunty and Teacher called the Great Upset. They had supported Queen Sylvia (a fellow Northerner like them), who had been accused of adultery and treason. After her execution, Kalothia's parents had fled for their lives, fearing King Osura's anger.

Kalothia had been only days old, and they'd quickly realized that running and hiding was too dangerous for their newborn. They'd left her in the safekeeping of their dear friends Teacher and Aunty and had marshaled support from the lord of the Northern Territory to provide a home and bodyguards for her. Since then, there had been no news of them at all. She didn't know if they were alive or dead, but she had remained in hiding ever since to prevent the king from killing her or using her to lure out her parents.

This was the story Kalothia had been told repeatedly, with very little variation or any added details. It troubled her that Teacher could lecture for hours on how the value of cowrie shells rose and fell or why Galla would never be provoked into war with Padma though its eastern neighbor made frequent raids along their border, or myriad other topics, yet he had so

little to say about the Great Upset and her parents. It made her certain they were hiding something.

The sun had entered its golden phase. It bathed the compound in yellow light. Citronella candles had been lit and arranged along the table. Kalothia suppressed a sigh. Nahir would not make it for her age day. Disappointment dragged at her shoulders and sadness clogged her throat. If he arrived the next day she would be gone. Would she ever see his solemn, thoughtful face again?

Aunty began uncovering the dishes, revealing fried rice, steamed bean cakes, roasted plantain, spicy gizzard, and baked fish. Ye-Ye saw an opportunity and leaped onto the table to inspect the bowls.

“If you touch anything, you’re going in the pot!” Aunty warned the small monkey.

He chattered unhappily at her and bared his teeth.

Kalothia wagged her finger at him. “Stop that! You know she always feeds you. There’s yours!” His bowl was made from half of a dried melon husk and sat at the end of the table. It had been filled with more chopped fruit and nuts than Ye-Ye’s tiny body could hope to accommodate. “See! You should say ‘Sorry, Aunty!’”

Ye-Ye blew out his lips, making them vibrate noisily, then scuttled over to sample the items in his bowl. Kalothia laughed at her pet’s antics. They were a welcome distraction from her thoughts. Clarit appeared and took a seat at the table, resting her ever-present cudgel by her feet.

“Teacher! Come say the prayer!” Aunty called.

Teacher ambled out. He'd washed up and changed into a tunic and shokoto that were only slightly wrinkled. He moved to the head of the table, adjusted his glasses, and raised his palms in the air. "We thank you, Goddess, for eyes to admire, a mouth to taste, and a heart to appreciate your goodness. We thank you for Kalothia and pray that you cover her in your celestial light."

"Let her will be done," Kalothia and Clarit murmured in affirmation. Kalothia lifted her palm to her mouth in the gesture that would seal the prayer.

"Is that all?" Aunty demanded.

Teacher widened his eyes innocently.

"You didn't pray for her health, for her safety, for an increase in wisdom..."

Teacher was already sitting and filling his bowl with food. "I said 'cover her in your celestial light,'" he argued. "The Goddess has better things to do than listen to lengthy prayers."

Kalothia laughed. The two of them would never change. Aunty was the most devout person in the house, yet she refused to pray over the meals because the Goddess's third precept was "The burden of learning and leadership falls on men." Teacher wasn't sure the Goddess existed, but as the only man in the house, he was forced to lead the prayers if he wanted a peaceful life.

Aunty grunted with irritation. She grabbed Kalothia's bowl and began scooping a generous portion of everything into it.

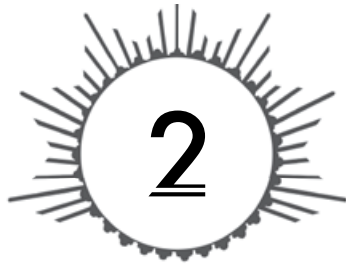
“I nearly forgot!” Teacher drew a small package from the breast pocket of his tunic. “Happy age day!” he called, passing it down to Kalothia.

Tears sprung up in Kalothia’s eyes. For a moment, she couldn’t speak. Who would give her age-day gifts once she left the forest? Would her parents? Would they apologize for the sixteen age days they had missed?

She shoved the thoughts away and pulled the cord on the parcel before unfolding the fabric. Inside was a small book bound in leather soft as butter. She flipped it open and gasped. It was filled with beautiful hand-drawn maps of Galla. Each of the four territories occupied a separate page. She traced her fingers over the lines of the Eastern Territory, slid them to the area that symbolized the Faledi forest, her forest, a place she would finally leave. She fingered the book of maps and turned up her smile a few notches. “It’s perfect, Teacher! Thank you.”

Sadness rushed through Kalothia. This was the last time they would sit here like this. The last time Aunty would overfill her bowl to ensure she ate well. The last time she would watch Teacher gobble his food with cheeks puffed and sweat beading on his forehead. The last time Aunty would pour her lemon water and wait for her to begin her meal before filling her own bowl.

If Kalothia found her parents, maybe they could all eat together. Once the danger from the king passed, of course. There were so many ifs and maybes it all seemed so unlikely. Still, she could hope.



The Attack

Kalothia woke to blackness. The oil lamp had burned itself out, indicating it was close to dawn. The waxy-sweet smell of the geraniol oil Aunty liked to sprinkle around the bed to repel mosquitoes hung thick in the air. It clogged the back of her throat.

Beside her, Aunty slept noisily, her breath sucking in and out like the rumble of thunder. Tension clutched every muscle in Kalothia's body. It was time.

She slid out of bed. Aunty slept on, her noisy rhythm unchanged. Kalothia paused for a moment. She couldn't see Aunty in the deep blackness, but she pictured her round face, the features she knew as well as her own. She said a silent farewell.

The clay floor was cool beneath her feet. She inched across the black room until her outstretched hands made contact with a chair. Running her fingers along its carved back, she felt her way down to the seat where she'd folded her clothes up in a wrapper. She scooped the bundle up and inched a little sideways until she felt the warm wood of the sleep room door. A soft weight landed on her right shoulder.

Ye-Ye chirped gently against her ear then snuggled against her neck. She patted her vervet's furry body and paused by the door to check Aunty was still asleep. One breath, two breaths, three breaths, the gusty boom of Aunty's exhalations continued in a steady rhythm. The room was still.

She slipped out.

There was no point creeping past Clarit's room. The woman had ears like a cat. She had decided her plan had to include Clarit following her out of the house.

The washing room glowed with the dim light of an oil lamp turned to its lowest setting. Its flickering yellow flame painted the walls gold.

Kalothia placed Ye-Ye on an upturned bucket then washed up quickly, impatient to be on her way. After dressing in a shokoto and a simple tunic, she wound the brightly printed wrapper around her head, ensuring her red hair was tucked securely away, as she always did when she left the compound, to protect her identity. She'd always been told red hair ran only in the royal family and would give away her identity as a minor royal if discovered. When she was ready, she scooped Ye-Ye onto her shoulder and left the washing room, taking the oil lamp with her. Outside, a cockerel called loudly across the yard.

She found her cloth bag behind the scroll shelf, dropped two knives inside, pulled the strap over her head, then tucked a third dagger into the waist of her shokoto. What did you pack when you were leaving your home forever? She grabbed a handful of cowrie shells from a bowl on the scroll shelf. Once she was out of the forest, she'd hitch a lift. Anything

going west. In her heart, she was clamoring to go south. She knew she'd make far more progress on finding her parents in the capital, Port Caspin. All the people who'd known them and might know something of where they'd been for the last sixteen harvests were in the South. But the royal court was also there. That part of the country would be teeming with the king's supporters. She'd be walking straight into a hornets' nest. No, she'd go west first, adjust to the outside world, test the waters, then see if she could edge toward the South for real answers to her questions.

In the provision room, she filled a banana leaf with nuts and dried fruit. She broke off a piece of the bread Aunty had baked the night before and handed it to Ye-Ye. "Don't get crumbs in my tunic."

She put the rest in her bag along with an empty waterskin. On her way back through the parlor she stopped, considered for a moment, then turned toward the scroll shelf. Her new leather map book sat among the parchments and rolled hemp scrolls. She slid it into her bag.

Her favorite spear stood tucked into a nook beside the scroll shelf. A deft twist of the shaft allowed her to slide the parts into one another until the weapon was reduced from six feet to one. At the door, she gave the house one last look. "Please, Goddess, in case you're listening, protect this home." She lifted her palm to her mouth to seal the prayer, then opened the door and slipped out.



Outside, the air smelled of the night's rain. The clean dampness eased the constriction in her throat. She forced herself to smile. She would be brave. She would not be fearful.

"Took your time." Clarit's dry voice spoke beside her.

Kalothia swallowed. Just one more hurdle to clear.

The sky had lightened enough to see the circle of trees and the outline of Clarit's broad shoulders and low-cropped hair as she leaned on a post by the vegetable patch.

"You don't have to come, Clarit." Kalothia said it for form, to avoid suspicion. She layered in a little exasperation for authenticity. "I'm just going to the stream to check on the fish baskets. I'll be back before the second milking."

Clarit snorted, as she knew her bodyguard would. "When I'm hauled before a court and found guilty of disobeying an order from Captain Godmayne himself and I'm sentenced to walk the Northern desert and die under the fiery heat, you'll plead my case, no doubt?"

Kalothia rolled her eyes. She had expected this. "You're so dramatic, Clarit. Fine. Let's go." She led the way across the yard.

The hens squawked in their hutch as they passed, their wings flapping excitedly against the wire mesh that kept out predators. Kalothia stepped aside when they reached the gate and let Clarit pass through first, to check it was safe. After several long moments, a low whistle sounded. Kalothia opened the gate and stepped out into the forest.

She took a moment to orient herself in the dim light. The earth was soft beneath her feet, still thick with rainwater.

Songbirds chorused loudly in the treetops. She breathed in, tasting moabi blossoms, damp wood, and ashy soil on her tongue.

“Are you planning to stand there all day?” Clarit asked.

Kalothia had to hold back a nervous laugh. If Clarit knew what she was planning, she’d lock her in the house and never let her out. Instead, she was urging her on.

Kalothia took a deep breath and set off. Over the years she had forged a web of pathways through the tangled foliage that were invisible to others but made her journeys easy. She led them along one. It crossed through the clearing where a storm had downed two large cashew trees during a long-ago rainy season. Kalothia had always told Clarit to use it as a marker for the way home. Once they’d passed it, they plunged back into the dense vegetation for a few cubits before reaching the cluster of palm trees where the tiny talapoin monkeys liked to play in the branches and hide among the coconuts.

As always, Clarit looked up and exclaimed, “Don’t these creatures grow tired?” The excitable mammals were endlessly fascinating to her.

While Clarit was distracted, Kalothia stepped back, unnoticed, and blended into the forest. Just as she’d planned. Ye-Ye muttered against her neck.

“Shush!” she said as she walked steadily away, her feet silent in the undergrowth. She wouldn’t wait for Clarit to notice she was missing and start searching for her. It was too dangerous; Clarit was too good at her job. She had to put distance between them, and quickly. Eventually, Clarit would

give up, find her way back to the cashew trees, and use them to guide her home, where she could send word to Nahir.

Kalothia walked through the dawn quiet, imagining the new life that awaited her. It was terrifying to think of fending for herself, meeting people outside the tiny circle of guardians who'd cared for her, but she was determined to adjust. She would travel to the nearby town of Illupeju and begin her journey there.

She'd been walking briskly for several minutes when a finger of unease slid over her. Something was wrong. Her eyes searched the layers of green and brown, her nose flared for unusual scents, her ears strained. Nothing. Then ... something. Slashing. Somebody was hacking their way through the forest. Multiple somebodies. Dread scratched at her stomach. She pulled her spear from her bag and hurriedly retraced her steps, moving back in Clarit's direction.

The attackers had reached her first.

It took a long moment to absorb the scene under the palm trees: the two people ranged around Clarit, their lethal-looking weapons raised, ready to kill. It took another second for the defensive training she'd learned over the years but never had cause to use to click into place. Then a flash of movement in her peripheral vision had her spinning to the right while her hands twisted her spear to full length. She threw Ye-Ye up into the branches of a tree and barely raised her spear in time to block the sweep of a cutlass.

The blade was wielded by a large man rearing up beside her. She blocked on instinct; there had been no time to think.

He swung again and she deflected. The force of the impact shivered up her arm.

Pain flared in her shoulder. She tried to step back, to plant her feet more securely, but the cutlass flew at her again, curving toward her head. She raised her spear to block it, but the jarring contact threw her to the forest floor.

The spear fell from her hands.

Ye-Ye scampered back and forth on a branch above the man, chattering at him loudly.

The attacker ignored the tiny animal and grinned down at her. “That was more fight than I expected.” His accent was so thick she could barely make out the words.

Kalothia lay sprawled on her back, her spear inches away. He reached down and tore the wrapper off her head. At the sight of her hair, he grunted in satisfaction and hoisted the cutlass above his head with both hands. His eyes were hard and pitiless. He meant to kill her.

Before he could swing down, Kalothia hooked a foot around his ankle. She used the leverage to drag herself up against his legs. With the speed of a rattlesnake, she whipped her dagger from her belt and buried it in the man’s fleshy calf. The sensation of the sharp metal tearing flesh made her gag. She’d never injured a person before.

The man howled and dropped to his knees.

She tore the blade free and scrambled away. Still on her knees, she snatched up her spear and held it defensively.

The man who had attacked her was clambering unsteadily to his feet. She risked a glance at Clarit. Her bodyguard had

drawn blood on both her opponents, one was limping badly. There was no time to see more. The man roared and leaped toward her. It was as though he had channeled all the pain of his injury and anger into his cutlass. He swung at her ferociously. But the pause had given her time to remember her training. Years of sparring with Nahir had forced her to learn ways to overcome stronger opponents. She'd learned to think fast and move faster.

When the man swung at her and she ducked and dodged, her evasion enraged him further. His swings grew harder but less accurate. She let him herd her backward until her shoulders pressed against a tree. When he swung for her again, she dropped to the ground. Above her, the cutlass blade sank into the trunk with a sharp crack. While the man worked to free it, Kalothia darted away from the tree, sprung to her feet, and swung her spear with all her might, slamming it against the back of his skull.

The man went down like a felled tree, raising dirt and leaves. He was unconscious. Or possibly dead. Kalothia didn't stop to determine which. She spun back to Clarit.

The two attackers – a man and a woman – were strong fighters but nothing compared to Clarit. They were sweating and panting in the swampy heat. Clarit was barely winded. Kalothia let out a relieved breath. Clarit would win this.

When Nahir had assumed management of her security, he'd reduced her bodyguards from two to one. Each guard would come and stay for three-month stretches, a secondment from the Northern army. She'd asked if he made the change

because she was in less danger. He'd told her no, she would never be in less danger, but he now assigned only his elite fighters, which was why she only needed one.

She watched Clarit feign a left dodge, jump right, and swing her cudgel at the man with a force that lifted him off his feet and sent him flying before he crashed into the brushwood.

The woman was losing blood from multiple wounds and had no hope of holding Clarit alone. Clarit bore down on her, knocking her to the earth with terrifying speed.

"Help me!" the woman cried. She was struggling to get up.

It took Kalothia a second to realize her words were not Gallan but Padman.

Who were these people?

Kalothia had always been told the danger was from the palace, from the network of spies the king had deployed across the country to seek out any supporters of his dead wife. But this woman was from Padma, the neighboring country. Why would they be in the forest? There was nothing here, except for her.

"Help me!" the woman cried again.

An arrow whistled through the air. A streak of black in the muddy light. Clarit twisted and it grazed her arm. Barely a scratch. She'd been lucky.

Clarit ducked. "Get down!" she shouted over her shoulder to Kalothia.

Kalothia dropped down too. She scanned their surroundings for the source of the arrow. A man stood by a

nearby tree. His hair was shaved close to his scalp and a short beard covered his jaw. His black clothes fell in unfamiliar lines from his tall, lean body. His hands worked swiftly, nocking a new arrow into the large bow he held.

Had Clarit seen him? She glanced back at Clarit and frowned. Clarit was no longer crouching but on her knees, swaying oddly. What was she doing?

“Clarit?” Kalothia called. They had to move before the man shot again.

Then Clarit fell backward.

Kalothia darted forward, keeping her body low, rushing to Clarit’s side.

White foam bubbled from her mouth. A strange, rancid scent stung Kalothia’s nose. She watched the vein pulsing in her bodyguard’s throat as though Clarit was struggling to breathe. Clarit’s eyes were wide and terrified, but she lay inert, paralyzed. Horror spread through Kalothia’s body like ice.

“Clarit?” Her voice trembled.

Clarit began to convulse, her body rolling violently until she stilled. Her brown eyes were wide open, staring at the sky, as white foam ran in rivulets from her mouth, slid across her smooth brown cheek, and pooled in the earth beside her.

“No!” Kalothia’s breath became short and choppy. Something squeezed tight in her chest. She grabbed the front of Clarit’s tunic. “No!”

An arrow whizzed past, thudding into the ground a handspan away. Kalothia turned. The man in the forest was watching her, his hands nocking a new arrow.

There was movement beside her. The injured woman was on her feet again.

Kalothia needed to move, but she was frozen.

Move! A part of her brain was screaming at her. But Clarit wasn't moving. Disjointed thoughts tumbled through Kalothia's head.

The twang of the arrow launching echoed through the air. Kalothia threw herself to the ground. The arrow thudded into the earth beside her.

A hand grabbed her and hauled her to her feet. Kalothia's brain was still frozen in horror. It was ingrained training and muscle memory that drew her dagger from the waist of her shokoto and rammed it into the belly of the woman holding her.

The woman's eyes widened with shock as Kalothia pulled her blade free. Then she fell to her knees and doubled over. Kalothia ran, plunging into the woods.