



THE IVORY KEY

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CHAPTER ONE

— VIRA —

THE DEAD BOY’S face was as gray as a cloudy sky moments before a storm. His short black beard sculpted and whittled his cheeks down to a point. Thin lips glittered in the watery moonlight that managed to penetrate the canopy, brighter than the famed rubies of his home province.

But Vira knew it was blood that made them shine so enticingly.

She lifted the flameless lantern higher. The ball of yellow light within crackled with magic as it washed over his embroidered sleeve, illuminating the row of silver fish encircling his wrist. A wave of nausea hit her. The crest of Onaar.

The scouts hadn’t been wrong. This was her betrothed — Lord Harish, son of the Viceroy of Onaar — now dead in the city of Dvar.

Vira’s legs wobbled as she rose from her crouch. But she steadied herself. A maharani didn’t show weakness. She took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders before turning to face the warriors who had found the body.

Three girls stood in a row, dressed in matching red kurtas and loose black pants, whispering to one another. One leaned against a neem tree, propped up by a shoulder, using the edge of a knife to file her fingernails. She straightened and nudged the others when she realized they’d garnered Vira’s attention.

“Where’s his horse?” Vira’s voice rang out sharper than she intended.

The girl with the knife, who looked barely older than Vira herself, toyed with the end of her braid. “There wasn’t one around here, Maharani.”

“And his convoy?”

“He didn’t appear to be traveling with one.”

Vira bit back a snarl. These warriors — ones her Council had claimed were the best in the country — were obviously missing something critical: common sense. “Lord Harish did not journey here on foot with no mount and no supplies. *Find them.*”

For a moment Vira thought the warriors would refuse. But then they bowed in unison, palms pressed together in front of their chests, before scattering into the woods without another glance behind them.

Wind raked through the Swapna Forest, and leaves from the mango and neem trees cascaded down, enveloping Vira in a cocoon of green and brown. Now that she was alone, an uncomfortable lurch tugged at her stomach.

She looked down at Harish again. His kurta was light enough in color to reveal the three pools of blood that had killed him. An arrow pierced the center of each red stain, black feather fletchings quivering in the late-summer breeze.

He was to have arrived at the palace days earlier, but there had been no letter, no news of a delay. And when he hadn’t shown up, she’d assumed that he was a reluctant noble plotting an escape from a marriage he wanted even less than she did. She hadn’t expected this.

This wasn’t the plan. It wasn’t how any of this was meant to happen. She couldn’t face the Viceroy of Onaar. She couldn’t face her Council. She couldn’t —

Breathe.

Reason broke through her haze of panic as her mother’s voice sounded in her head.

A maharani never runs away from a problem. She faces it head-on.

She could picture her mother's severe face as if she were standing right there, hissing the same lessons in Vira's ear a thousand times, not expecting Vira to retain any of them.

Face it head-on.

Find out who killed Harish — quickly. Guards had already been dispatched through the forest and the surrounding neighborhoods of Dvar, searching for witnesses, for any clues that might lead them to a suspect. But it had been more than an hour since the scouts had reported the body. If the guards hadn't yet found the killer, Vira had a sinking feeling that they never would.

Find a way to appease the viceroy. It would be only a matter of days before he learned of his son's fate — a precious few days in which Vira had to strike a new deal with him or find some other way to protect the country from Lyria, their northwestern neighbor. Lyria hadn't made a move in months, but the threat of the war she'd inherited had been a constant shadow lingering over Vira's rule from the moment she'd become the maharani eight months earlier.

How do I do this, Amma?

But her mother had never offered comfort even when she was alive.

Vira's hand drifted down to the iron hilt of the talwar strapped to her waist, as if it would give her strength. It had been pried from her dead mother's stiff hands and thrust into hers. It was polished and sharp, the curved silver blade gleaming, as if it had never been covered in the blood of her ancestors. It hummed against her hand with latent magic, a demanding buzz that Vira was still unaccustomed to.

In truth, everything about the talwar was unfamiliar — the weight, the balance, even the elaborate designs carved into the hilt. *This is a maharani's weapon* was the only response she'd received when she fought to keep the

one she'd trained with for years. That weapon was simple, elegant, comfortable. But because it hadn't been forged with magic, it now hung on the wall opposite her bed, mounted there as a reminder of the life she'd left behind.

At the sound of rustling, Vira turned to the shadows, her talwar drawn. Its magic grated against her palm, harsh and unforgiving, as her hand trembled. The blade glowed white, crackling with sparks of lightning as she braced herself for the return of Harish's killer.

But it was Amrit who stepped out of the trees. Vira's grip relaxed, the magic waned, and blood rushed back into her fingers. She shoved the talwar into its sheath, trying to ignore the weight of her mother's ever-present judgment.

A maharani's talwar is an extension of her rule.

She couldn't even hold a talwar. How could she expect to hold on to her country?

"You should have waited for me." Leaves crunched under Amrit's feet as he crossed the length of the clearing, walking toward her. A dull shard of moonlight illuminated his angular face. He hadn't changed out of his formal guard attire, and a thick silver bangle wrapped around the silk sleeve of his upper left arm. She couldn't see it from where she stood, but she knew there was a medallion in the center that was stamped with a swan — a sign of his rank and service to the royal family.

"Contrary to what the Council believes, I can protect myself against a few wild deer," she said.

Vira kept her voice light, but her mouth burned with the bitter aftertaste of the lie. She hadn't been able to wield a blade with a steady hand since the battle at Ritsar eight months before. Not since she'd failed to command Ashoka's armies to victory. Not since she'd lost Ashokan land for the first time in four hundred years.

Not since she'd erred so badly, the viceroys of two provinces had walked

out of her Council, taking with them countless troops and resources she desperately needed.

Amrit looked at her, and for the span of a heartbeat she was certain he could see right through her. She hadn't told him — told anyone — about the nightmares, about the way her hand shook each time she had to draw her weapon. But Amrit sometimes seemed to know her better than she knew herself.

"I should certainly hope so," he said. "I did train you, after all."

And what a great student she had turned out to be, freezing in battle, letting innocent citizens die in her stead.

"You were busy. And I wasn't recognized." Vira gestured to herself. With her plain red kurta and simple braid, she could have been twin to any one of those careless warriors. She'd even taken off all her jewelry except for the thin gold chain she always wore around her neck, the small pendant hidden beneath her collar.

Amrit gave her an exasperated look. "That's precisely what concerns me. You don't have to do this alone, Vira."

Vira. Yet another thing her mother would have disapproved of. Amrit was the captain of her guard now, but he'd been her friend first. And she hadn't been able to bear the thought of him calling her Maharani and bowing to her with deference. No, this one small thing was a reminder that not everything was different. That there were still some parts of her the title of maharani couldn't strip away.

Amrit crouched before the body. "This is bad."

"The Council won't be happy." That was an understatement. It would be a miracle if the Council was anything short of furious.

"They're your elders, Vira. They don't want to take orders from an eighteen-year-old. You have to charm them."

"Pretty words woo councilors, not angry demands," Vira recited.

Another saying her mother had drilled into her head. But frustration laced her voice. She wasn't her mother. She didn't have the gift of pretty words.

Even the alliance with the Viceroy of Onaar had been difficult to negotiate. The engagement to Harish had been a last-ditch strategy to convince the viceroy to return to serve on the Council, to lend his province's troops and considerable wealth to secure the western border. But it had always been shortsighted, a temporary solution meant to delay the mounting problems. Because it wasn't armies that Ashoka needed. It was magic.

Vira reached up to grip her pendant, her thumb tracing the familiar, comforting grooves of the image carved into the gold coin: twin blades crossed over a lotus. Magic was how Ashoka had maintained its independence over the last five hundred years. Magic that was mined from the quarry beneath the palace — a source of raw power, inherently useless until the mayaka, those who worked with magic, processed and used it to forge items of immense power.

Magic was woven into the very fabric of Ashokan society. It was threaded into the currency — into the skinny seys and square tolahs and gold jhaus, ensuring that they couldn't be forged. It was laced into every brick that made up the border walls, shielding and protecting the country from intruders. It powered their carriages, their lamps, their messages. It was even Ashoka's biggest export, traded to Lyria and other countries for painted pottery and plush rugs, for medicines and crops not found in Ashoka.

Or it had been. Trade had stalled months ago, the bustling ports and endless caravans already a fading memory. The Emperor of Lyria was convinced that Ashoka was hoarding all the magic they had. But that wasn't why Vira hadn't renegotiated the trade agreements.

It was because there was no magic left to trade.

It was her biggest secret: the horrible truth of just how little was left in the quarry. Magic waned with use, and without regular replenishment,

Ashoka's magical borders were already wavering. And if Vira couldn't protect Ashoka against invaders, there would be no Ashoka for her to defend.

"Look," Amrit said, tilting Harish's chin. Purple veins spidered down the dead man's neck and chest, disappearing into his kurta. "Poison, likely."

Amrit yanked out the arrow embedded in Harish's stomach, turning it over in his hand before holding it out for Vira to see. The arrowhead wasn't flat and notched, like the ones she'd used in her brief and catastrophic attempts at wielding a bow. This one was conical, the metal twisting in half a spiral. It was beautifully elegant, and unlike anything she'd ever seen. But judging from the look on Amrit's face, he had.

"You know who killed him," Vira said.

Amrit hesitated and then nodded once. "I can guess."

"Who?"

He said nothing for a long moment. In the distance, a mynah bird trilled. Another one answered its song. "Later," he promised. "We should move the body before —"

"Amrit —"

A twig snapped.

"What was that?" Vira's hand slid to her talwar as she turned. And froze.

Three figures stood several feet away, arrows nocked and aimed. They had dupattas wrapped around their faces, covering their mouths and noses, masking their identities.

Amrit stepped in front of her, talwar drawn.

The boy in the middle spoke. "Put down your weapons, intruders. We have you surrounded."

As proof, an arrow whistled from behind, traveling over Vira's head to lodge in a tree trunk in front of her. She whirled around, her heart racing as she scanned the dark tree line for invisible figures.

“Who are you?” Amrit demanded, not lowering his weapon.

“Who are *we*?” the boy mocked. “I’m surprised you don’t recognize us. We recognize you. *Guard*.” The word was spat out like a curse.

There was only one group of people who were arrogant enough to expect their reputation to precede them, who would dare speak the word *guard* with such hatred.

“Ravens,” Vira breathed. The boy’s eyes snapped to her. She stepped out from behind Amrit. “You’re thieves, not killers.”

Stories of bandits who lived within the Swapna Forest and robbed merchants and travelers and anyone associated with the crown had been circulating for years. The Ravens, as they called themselves, had pledged to fight against the maharani long before Vira had ever taken the throne. Another war she’d inherited from her mother.

The boy pointedly glanced at Harish’s crumpled body. “Clearly, the same cannot be said for you.”

“We didn’t kill him.” Vira let go of her hold on the talwar, raising both her hands to showcase her empty palms.

The boy was unmoved. “That may very well be. But your fate is a matter for our leader.”

Desperation drove her forward. “You don’t und—”

The figures drew their bowstrings back. Vira stopped.

“Make no mistake —” The boy’s voice was sharper than a blade. “We don’t *like* to kill, but if you run, we will hunt you.” This wasn’t a warning. It was a guarantee.

Vira blinked, licking her lips once. Twice. They were outnumbered. She glanced at Amrit, and she could see him coming to the same conclusion. He lowered his weapon.

Her breaths came out in small, shallow pants as thick gray smoke

suddenly swirled around them — curling around her knees, snaking around her waist and chest.

Amrit coughed. “Vi—” He coughed harder as the fog enveloped him.

Vira’s eyes watered. “Amrit?”

The smoke burned down her throat, her lungs, her stomach. She gasped for breath. She coughed, too, reaching for Amrit. But there was only air. She couldn’t see anything. Or hear. Or . . . think.

She had . . . she had to find . . . Amrit.

Vira fell to her knees. Dirt coated her hands, lodging under her fingernails. Her arms could no longer hold her up. The faintest scent of neem clung to the air.

And then there was only darkness.