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Fate of the Red Queen

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Chapter 1

Kuen whispered, “It would be so easy to just sit down and let our wounds bleed out into silence and peace.” She shifted a sticky grip on her mentor. Both women were tired, wounded, and in pain. Daulyin was barely walking. Their enemies could not be far behind. Kuen searched through the underbrush of the jungle for any path to safety.

“Which way do we go?” she asked her mentor.

Daulyin had led the way. She was the one who had chosen to come here, and knew where they were going. Daulyin did not reply. Kuen looked at her; the woman had become very pale. The red tattoo swirling up Daulyin's neck and head was beacon bright, even under sweat and filth. Kuen pulled Daulyin's left arm over her shoulder, and renewed her grasp on her waist with her stronger arm. She felt that only their sweat made their coagulating blood slick in her hand. She took another step.

Pain seared Kuen's leg, through her pubic bone and into her belly, but they had to keep moving—no matter how much Kuen wanted to stop. Two more steps, and her mentor faltered again.

“Kuen! Stop. I must stop,” Daulyin said. Her voice was ragged with exhaustion and pain.

“Teacher, I have to get you to safety. Quoros's men are still back there.”

“No.” Daulyin shook her head. “You must leave me. You must go on.” She pushed herself from Kuen's sweaty grip and fell to the ground. Her eyes shut tight.

“Daulyin!” Kuen knelt beside her. “I'm sorry I did not fight better.”

“Good enough for a Red Nun Initiate, but not yet to face Quoros, my Kuenyinsen.”

Kuen turned away, and stood to guard the injured woman. Daulyin must on the verge of the Dark Path to call her by the name of the fabled Red Queen who had helped found their order.

Rolling her left shoulder, keeping it limber, she felt the bone deep bruise Quoros had left there. On her first day as an Initiate, Prince Quoros had brought war to her city, to her convent and her home. All the other nuns had fought, or fled with the temple children into the protection of Tamas city. Daulyin had fled, inexplicably, into the jungle from where no one had ever returned, taking Kuen with her.

I am not ready for this, Kuen thought to herself.

Kuen watched as her mentor took the bedroll off her back and clutched it to her chest, her eyes tight with the effort. Kuen could only think that she had to get her mentor to safety, and soon if a bedroll was too much for her to carry.

“Please come, teacher,” Kuen said while scanning the jungle for their enemy.

Daulyin opened her eyes, lifted the bundle up to Kuen and said, “You must take this to the Temple of the Brothers of the Coursat deeper into the Land of the Dead! There it will find its fate.”

“Your bedroll?”

Daulyin glared at her pupil. “You do those honors on your head no justice,” she spat. “What would anyone want with a bedroll?”

Kuen had no answer except, *A good place to sleep?* It was not an answer she would voice, much like her other thoughts: *I don't know where I am;* or *What are we doing here?* She could not express the shame of her fear. She took the bundle. It did go some way to explaining why they had come here; Daulyin must have some secret task. Now she was asking Kuen to

fulfill it. She wondered how she could argue her mentor into getting up and moving on, and scratched her head. It was shaved bald, and the blood from her initiate tattoo was crusty. Some of it flaked under her fingernails, along with grime and sweat.

Hearing a shout up the mountainside, Kuen dropped beside her mentor. The soldiers must have found their dead compatriots. Looking up the hill, she scowled at the clear trail of broken branches along with all the blood she and her mentor had smeared on large green and purple leaves. They had charted a path for their enemy to find them. Hoping for any indication of a good direction, Kuen slithered further down the hill and heard the sound of rushing water in the valley. She looked back up at Daulyin.

“There’s a creek. Come, teacher.”

“You must go, Kuen! Please. We did not raise you to die now. Please, do not let Quoros find you. You cannot fight him yet!”

What fight was not hers, if it had come? But it was already defeat. Blood marked their clothes, sticky against the slickness of sweat. As Kuen slithered back up the hill to her mentor’s side, her hands scraping against a root. Her teeth clenched against the memory of her *kampilan* scraping and breaking a collarbone of an enemy as her sword’s edge sliced into flesh. She shook her hands against the memories. This thought did neither remove the ache of her own wounds, nor give her strength. Quoros’ army still followed, ready to kill them. There would only be more of this. All these things seemed to drag her body, giving a physical weight to exhaustion. But it did not matter. She had someone to save.

“There’s a creek; we must go.” Kuen began to lift Daulyin again.

“I will die, but you cannot. Oh for my long life, take the roll and go.” Daulyin gave her a push. "By the blood and ash of the old Red Queen, you must go!"

Kuen staggered back. It had not been a hard push. The habit of obedience warred against the sense that leaving Daulyin betrayed the one person who had guided her whole life and given her everything she'd been taught. She thought, *I can't do this without you*, and wondered why Daulyin could stop and rest, yet push Kuen on? They were both exhausted, and bleeding, and dying.

Daulyin tried to push her again, feebly. "Go!" she tried to call out, but it was a whisper in the woods.

Kuen took the roll and scrambled down the mountain under large-leafed plants and trees. The creek might afford some aid to both of them, even if it meant defying her mentor. She could not bear to lose her, out here in this strange jungle. If Daulyin had to die, why not with all their friends? Why here, when they could have been battling beside the other nuns in the city? Kuen slipped, struggled to steady herself and wondered again why Daulyin had left the city and all the other nuns, and to come to this place, plotting out their path with their own blood for their enemies to follow. It made no sense. Why had her mentor brought her here with whatever was in this bundle? Into a jungle where no one ever returned? Kuen would find something to help them, and then go back for answers, as well as saving her mentor and friend.

Reaching the creek, she splashed into the water. Kuen looked where she'd heard the loudest plop of water and found signs of frog. Kuen thought the words that began her meditation, when the world would slow. She caught the frog, pulled her knife, and sliced the creature open as the world moved again at its normal pace. Its coagulating blood would help stop her bleeding. Ripping the hem of her robes, she tied the open frog tight over the bleeding wound on her thigh. She looked at the creek bed, pleased there was no swirl of mud in the water. Her quick movements had been focused.

As Kuen hunted for another frog for Daulyin, still splashing in the stream, she heard the sounds of men yelling up the hill, and one scream of horror and pain. She gripped the hilts of her *kampilan* and her *talibong*, ready to move. She froze for a moment, but Kuen knew. The sound of a fight ended far too quickly. She couldn't go back. There was no need. Cursing silently, Kuen grabbed the bedroll and escaped deeper into the jungle. She hoped she could lead the soldiers away from Daulyin and come back, but after all the noises died, she despaired.

Humidity made it almost hard to breathe, the sweat on her body was like the algae under her feet all proof of the wet heat of the jungle. Yet her body burned with shame. If the world had been dry, she would have ignited it, she burned brighter than her tattoo. Who was she to carry on her mentor's task? She had failed, already, so many times this day. Without knowing anything of Daulyin's task, Kuen could only try to do her best to deliver the bedroll, and whatever it contained, up to the temple. If she could even find it. Her stomach clenched, her eyes burned. She was lost completely. She had no direction. Clutching the bedroll, she did not really know what to do next except keep moving.

Despite the loss of blood and lack of food, she staggered a long while into the dusk and noise of night, but finally could not move. She clung to a tree branch, trying to keep herself upright. There were so many branches and leaves and vines around her that she could not even tell which tree this branch was a part of. Only that it was there. Something strong, though not quite steady, that she could cling to while she searched for any reserves of strength or purpose. There was none now, and the bracken, the loose soil of the jungle kept sliding under her feet. She tried to pull herself forward, and then slowly found herself slipping into a confusion of leaves that surrounded her.

It was easy, then, without Daulyin, to just lie there and wait to die. To become part of the jungle. The sound of cicadas and other insects grew loud. They whirred in her head, beginning to drive out all thought.

It felt like peace.

Slowly she closed her eyes to see a new star in the night of her own viewing. And for some reason that new star in her private night sky made her cry.

#

With lips and teeth stained red with the sacred cup, Laugin called out the rhythmic sounds, “Hok, te, cha...” Others, gathered around the fire tapped their gourd cups—tok, tok, tok—in counter point to her spoken rhythm. Everyone’s danced steps, the rhythm of their feet as they pounded the ground, the tok of the cup, and her chanting seemed to rise from the ground. When it began to echo against the trees of the jungle she called out, “Chu!” Everyone froze.

As the ground vibrated, they waited. In those precious moments, she mourned the frozen heart beats of all who lay underground. She wondered if their future queen could hear those frozen heart beats, or feel it. *We all wait, she thought, till Kuen comes home, hopefully with the key to end it all!*

She was about to speak the word to start the dance again when Toursen stepped into the clearing. She turned to him in some surprise. His face was tight. She stepped out of the pattern towards him. “What is it?” she asked him.

“Quoros has marched on Tamas and the temple where Daulyin has been training Kuen,” he said. “I need warriors to go to our border and help Daulyin bring Kuen home.”

No one refused. They could not. Kuen was their only hope. Regardless of any attack on Kuen, they would have to exterminate anyone who crossed into their land. Still, this was extraordinary. Both Quoros and Kuen had returned at the same time! One they would gladly kill. The other they would die to protect. For Kuen, they would do all they could to keep her alive with hope that she would know how to end her mother's spell.

Toursen turned and started into the jungle with Laugin in step beside him. The others spread out and disappeared into the trees.

"We cannot let him kill her. Should we go out of the jungle?" Laugin asked, "To the city itself?"

"I think not," Toursen said. "Daulyin and the Nuns can protect her till the border."

"After how many years, why does he come back now?" She asked, exasperated.

"He was always greedy. It could be because he knows the wealth of Yezgyin hidden under this jungle." Laugin glared at him. While true, it was certainly not as easy as just walking into the jungle and picking up rubies that were once prized gems of the land. Toursen shrugged. "Perhaps it is that he wishes to fight us again to die, or because it was the *one* war he did not finish. The Kuenyinsen did far too good a job of preventing victory for either side."

"And preventing a great deal more! Did you think she knew what it was she was doing?"

Toursen shrugged. "She wanted to stop the war. She did that. And everything that came with it? It is too late to wonder. We can only hope that Kuen can finally end what she caused." He looked at her. "Are you ready to die?"

"To actually die, to have my spirit move on, to return to the earth? Yes. And you?"

“I would live a little while longer, to see what sort of queen Kuen will make. I did not have much chance to know the last one. Daulyin believes she dreams of the souls beneath the ground, and within the water. She dreams of lights, but does not yet know what it is she sees.”

Laugin snorted. “How could she know how different and important she truly is? The queen’s law said she must be raised in the care of the Red Nuns—not knowing who she was, like all the other temple children—but then because it became clear she had not escaped the spell. What do we tell her now? Kuen does not even know how old she is,” Laugin said. She waved her hand towards the jungle. She was not happy with that thought. Toursen didn’t look happy either.

“You do not know how old she is either,” he said. “You have not counted the days, nor have I.” Years of tension made his shoulders like cables so tight he could almost snap like a dry branch, yet he moved so gracefully. Laugin knew he wondered if Quoros would kill Kuen. Would he have the chance in Tamas, in the temple where Kuen had trained all her life? Would their hope be destroyed before Kuen could return to these lands?

“The day of her birth, and the many long years after....” Laugin sighed. “Do you think she can end the Kuenyinsen’s spell?”

“She is the only one who can. *We* certainly haven’t been able to!”

Laugin felt the tight grip in her stomach, almost blinding, making her want to walk away from Toursen, find peace away from all those others in the jungle walking to protect their last hope. She could not speak of her own part in creating the spell. There were times she was furious with Toursen for his part. They had done what they’d been asked to do, done what the Red Queen had demanded they do, in an attempt to end a war that was destroying her country. She shivered against the need for silence about her anger, about her part, and about the sense of judgment against herself and the man who walked beside her.

He stopped all of a sudden, stooped down and touched the earth. “I remember my friend. I will have your soul set free. Kuen is coming home.”

When he stood, Laugin said, “You do not remember the days, but you know where your friends lay.” His friends had been part of the enemy he’d fought with, and then deserted to help the Queen. She shook her head. “This jungle has grown too old for me to remember. But then you fought in that war, while I was in the palace.”

“I was in the palace at the end too, Laugin.” He looked at her. He could not hide his own sorrow from her, after all these years. “Come,” he said, “we must make haste. We must be able to defend this land from Quoros and bring Kuen home to do the work we hope she was born to do.”

#

Kuen was too tired to weep or move. There was only one reason to get up and keep moving: find a temple and there leave Daulyin’s bedroll and whatever it contained—in a jungle from which all who entered never returned. The Land of the Dead. She had only been here a day, and had come to realize it was far bigger than she expected, and dense with trees and plants. She would die searching for a temple.

Daulyin’s last words were not strong enough to push her back upright. Kuen clutched Daulyin’s bedroll, clinging to her last words. But the cicadas whirred. The sound wrapped her in lethargy; the sense of silence and peace returned with a sound like a pause, a dying echo that caught at memories of half remembered dreams. Somehow, with her eyes closed, she could sense stars across the land, waiting in a night of her own. Where she could rest, and stop, and do

nothing. Like they waited—in one long peaceful pause. She opened her eyes to look up at the dark tree tops overhead.

“Here she is.”

A man’s voice. Kuen opened her eyes, and a shadowed face moved over her. The shadows seemed familiar, something from a childhood dream, as if she knew him. She struggled to care.

“Alive?” A woman’s voice. Kuen thought it was Daulyin and tried to move to see her mentor alive, but her body was stiff with pain.

“Yes,” the man said.

Firelight lit the man’s eyes. No more dreamlike thoughts. Reality came. He was a stranger. Kuen pulled her knife and cut at his throat, but he was fast and strong. “No, Kuen.” His hand gripped her wrist, holding it without any effort. She was that tired.

“You are safe, child,” the woman said. Kuen looked at her, but it was not Daulyin. Another stranger. Kuen felt dizzy looking at this woman. “Who are you?”

“Regents of this land for the heir of the Red Queen,” said the woman. “I am Laugin, and this is Toursen. *Yiness*, Kuen. We bring no harm to you.”

Yiness. Peace. Peace among friends. That’s what it meant. No one talked like that anymore, except a few nuns, the older ones, Daulyin’s colleagues in the temple. Kuen nodded, though, to let them know she understood.

Laugin helped her up, holding her steady while the landscape shifted and swirled. They had built a fire. Toursen was feeding it and cooking something over the flames. Laugin handed her a gourd filled with tea. She sipped it through a bamboo straw. It was a green tea, and bitter, but after the first taste Kuen wanted more.

“My mentor, Daulyin...I left her.”

“We found her,” Toursen said. “She walks this world no longer. Those who followed you live no more.”

Kuen swallowed tea. “I must find the Temple of the Brothers Coursat.”

For a moment peace and joy lit his eyes before Toursen bowed his head. “We will take you there.”

“After you have rested,” Laugin added. “You’ve lost a lot of blood.”

“How long?”

“Tomorrow. You are well guarded, Kuen.”

Laugin and Toursen bound her wounds. Toursen praised her clever use of the frog, but removed it and bound it tight. Laugin put poultices over her various bruises, binding them in place as well.

“Rest now,” Laugin said when they were done.

Still in pain, and with her hands on both weapons, Kuen slept in a jungle which had two more people living within its borders than she’d expected.

The journey took about a week. They moved slow for Kuen’s sake. Toursen fed her bits of knowledge about the jungle, showing her the best fruits to eat, and the easiest ways to hunt. When they stopped to rest, Laugin renewed her poultices and bandages, and gave her the bitter tea in a gourd cup. The leaves were loose, but the bamboo straw had small holes in it so she could not drink the leaves. Kuen noticed it was similar to the cups and straws they carried with them. They did not offer her any of their strange mixture. Whatever it was had made their teeth as red as her tattoo. They did not answer many of her questions, and when they did, they gave

answers as enigmatic as Daulyin's. They said nothing about Kuen's destination, except that they knew the place.

Her two guides left her at the foot of worn steps, uneven and nearly lost in the growth of the jungle. "Are you sure this is the place?" Kuen asked, dubious.

"The temple is up there," Toursen said.

Their faces were lit with some inner joy. Both were confident.

Kuen looked up the steps crowded by growth. The path was clear, but large jungle trees had begun to lift the heavy stone steps with their roots. She turned to thank them and ask them who lived in the temple, but Toursen and Laugin had disappeared into the jungle. Alone again, she ascended the steps.

#

Laugin looked at Toursen as he watched Kuen slowly climb the steps. They knew Kuen could no longer see them through the jungle cover. "Should we leave her?" she whispered to him.

"She is an initiate, Laugin, and a warrior. She has been trained to meet this challenge."

"But Toursen, she has just lost...think of this. All that training was in Tamas, at the temple Soukhan, as a nun. Not as our future queen. All she knows is gone. We have no choice but to hope, to believe that she is our only hope. Is that enough?"

He looked at her. "All she needs is up there, isn't it?"

Laugin shook her head. "*If* she sees it is within her. Not in the blood still drying on her clothes and the pain and loss of a dying friend and mentor."

"Daulyin isn't dead, Laugin."

“Yes, but does Kuen know that? If she saw her now, it wouldn’t really make much difference, only confuse her. There are things, perhaps, she ought to know.”

“What? Should we go up and tell her?” he asked, shocked. “After we agreed not to all these years? Tell her *now*?”

“No, but...but suddenly I wonder if there’s a difference between who we want her to be—need her to be—and who she might want to become without knowing her past.”

“How?”

“In some things we never gave her a choice.”

Toursen’s shoulders, which had relaxed some in the sheer joy of meeting Kuen, grew tight. “And after what the Kuenyinsen did? Did *we* have a choice?” Laughin did not blame him for the knife edge bitterness of his words.

“No, except between living and not really dying.” She sighed. “But maybe we should have told her something of who she is, despite the rules of the convent.”

“Perhaps we can wait just a little bit longer and see what she does,” Toursen said. “It might be good to see how she handles what she finds up there.”

“And then what?”

“I do not know. I am hoping she will. We do not know if she must end the war Quoros started and that her mother sacrificed herself to end, or if she must merely be someone we believe in, and someone who believes enough in us to save us.” Another problem invaded her thoughts, and inspired more reserve. “Her mother believed she was protecting her people, and look what it brought us. Quoros did not care and look what that brought you, and all his soldiers. If she fights, does she fight for all of us? If she is our sovereign queen, is she queen for all of us?”

It was a tricky question to ask Toursen. After all this time, would they become enemies again? Including him, there were still many of Quoros' compatriots in the jungle, defending the land with those who had been born here—all of them undying, unable to rest, so many lives beneath years of bracken and leaves, or swamp waters, and caught in their last heartbeat, last breath. Those that still walked battled side by side with former enemies to keep the secrets of the land safe.

“Is she here,” Laughin asked, afraid for Toursen, “for us all?”

Toursen took a deep breath. “We've waited this long to find out. We can wait a few days more.”

#

Alone, Kuen ascended the large stone steps. Roots of towering trees had shifted some of the stones. One, which she identified as some sort of Bombax, was in bloom. Red blossoms had taken over what leaves there might have been. But other trees crowded the blooms with their deep green leaves. Some of the petals had fallen to the ground, carpeting one of the stone steps in red, others highlighting how the tree's roots had lifted a step to nearly vertical. Kuen clambered over them, shifting and crushing red blossoms.

It hurt to climb those steps. Her shoulder still felt the bruise of Quoros' blade, a scant week later. Clambering over rough steps, she felt a little bit of a pull on the wound on her thigh. She hoped she hadn't opened it again.

The steps were an obvious ruin, all along its rise. But as she'd been guided by two more people in in this Land of the Deadn, she could hope there would be someone at the top to receive Daulyin's bundle.

For most of the journey, the jungle canopy was a deep green ceiling. Towards the top of the stairs, it opened up to show her stone pillars and clear blue sky. The sight of clear sunlight filled her with delight. She smiled despite her tiredness, and climbed the stairs with more speed.

The steps brought her to a pillared entrance that rode part of a ridge rising steeply to the left. The front courtyard's roof had caved in, leaving fallen stone. The temple lay in ruins along the sheer slopes that only the jungle could cling to, making the ruined stairs, perhaps, the only way to reach this place. Taking a deep breath, Kuen called out.

No one answered.

She found only snakes in the temple, and killed them. Moving through the few rooms she could access, no one answered her calls. She found only jungle vines, wind scattered leaves, insects, and various reptiles. With the blood of seven snakes marking her *kampilan*, Kuen sat upon a stone and looked up at the empty blue sky.

There was no one to tell her what to do next.

A small part of her tried to believe that all Daulyin and the other nuns had taught her could help guide her now, but there was nothing. There was no one to act for, defend or protect, only herself. As the sun moved, she did try to apply or impose any of their teaching onto the situation. The beliefs she was taught meant nothing in the backdrop of the jungle that surrounded her.

It was terrifying. The boundaries of her prior life, the rules and structure were gone. Here now was an incredible vastness of jungle. Though she had been walking in the jungle with two people for a few days, she was alone among sounds that were all strange.

Once she had thought the jungle that hugged the edges of rice patties, and small villages just beyond the city and temple walls would be a place of mysterious, but deep green peace. If

one could brave the few legends that said no one survived there—for it was far too dangerous a place—that it would be a place of meditation of deep green quiet. But the sounds were raucous. Strange birds, the cries of monkeys, and other beasts were alien to her.

She wanted to hear the noises of the temple. The chants, the prayer bells, the chatter of all the children they taught or had taken in to care for, the periodic and well-timed clash of practice weapons, and even the muffled noise of the city beyond their walls. The rules and the meditative quietness were all gone. She sat on the weathered stone and realized what a monstrous lie she would have to tell herself to make the ruined temple be a part of the world she understood.

She had only one thing left. One last thing to tell her what she could now do. Daulyin's bundle.

Carefully she opened the bedroll. What she found was a surprise. It was a ceremonial gown, and the ruins of a tiered headdress or crown. Both were white and encrusted with rubies. The price of the rubies alone were worth armies. She knew that much, but she had never seen rubies like this. She had understood them to be pink. She had never imagined gemstones to have this much fire.

The gleaming white gown, the fire of the gemstones did not tell her one thing more about what to do next. It gave her no hint as to where she could deliver the bundle, if not here where Daulyin had sent her. Who else would or could receive it? The bundle, its contents, meant nothing to her. The two regents had said nothing about it, so perhaps they could not tell her more. She had tried to ask about the temple—but they had offered nothing other than this was the Temple of the Brothers of the Coursat.

She sat among the ruins of a temple, looking down into a valley crowded with green. To her left there were rooms she could try to explore, but to what purpose? Everything that had

defined her life was gone. This was bad, but the purpose which she had been given was also gone, and that was worse unless there were secrets in the temple she could uncover. What she had seen, this was unlikely. Carvings had worn away—faded into formless nobbles that barely indicated their prior shapes. Stones had fallen in, destroying rooms, and had there been rolls or books, they had probably all rotted into dust.

She had failed even before she could begin.

Defeat and loss grew in her.

All she had were a sword, memories, a bedroll containing a wealth of rubies, and the lingering pain of the cut in her leg and the bruise on her shoulder. She took a deep breath and opened up the bundle of leaves that held the dense salve that Laugin had given her. She took some, rubbed it between her palms to soften it, and then rubbed her shoulder with it. She gave herself a little time to think.

She had not fought well in the city. Quoros's blade had been turned at the last moment by Daulyin as Kuen had stumbled in an offline move. The bruise was now black and green. She knew both it, and the pain, would fade, with or without the salve.

The pain that would not go away: Daulyin was dead and Kuen had failed in honoring her dying request. There was no bruise to prove that inadequacy. In her first days as an Initiate, everything had gone grossly wrong. She had been abandoned by fate into a world and a life had no meaning. She could not return to Tamas, and leave Daulyin's unfinished. Though she would return to what she knew, the thought was unbearable.

Kuen put her head in her hands. The stubble of her hair scratched her palms. It could not yet cover her initiate tattoo. Dropping her hands, she began to tremble. She made a decision: she would not shave her head again. That would mark both failures.

She tied up the bedroll again, Kuen took it and her *kampilan*, which Daulyin had given her the day she'd been shaved and tattooed, and tied them together. She looked for a narrow tunnel. Crawling in, she left the bundle underground.

She emerged and wondered what she would do for the rest of her life on the mountain. Perhaps nothing. She laid down on a slab of stone. She breathed, and it was like peace, like silence.

#

Toursen watched Kuen examine at the ceremonial gown, and the tiered headdress. It had been a long time since he's seen that crown. He could not stand seeing the cut that went down the middle, almost tearing it in half. He turned his head for a minute, surprised to feel heat in the lid of his eyes. His heart pounded, and he bit back tears of grief and shame. When he turned to look at Kuen, he could see the confusion plain on her face. There was no hair to hide any expression. She shook her head again.

She paused, thinking, looking around. She rubbed salve on her shoulders. But he could see her proud warrior shoulders began to fall. Over the years, through Daulyin, he'd helped guide her martial art training. Even with wounds in her legs and shoulders she had not walked less than a well-trained swordswoman. She had been determined to fulfill her mentor's quest. Now as the day began to fade, so did that confidence, as if leaking into the slowly growing night.

He watched her put her head in her hands, the hands and arms for a moment tense with grief. He watched as she made some sort of decision, and then bundle up the gown, and then also her *kampilan*... and then he watched in horror as she crawled in a tunnel and left them underground.

Over the next few days, both he and Laugin watched Kuen. Other *dhatu* also came to guard and watch. Laugin said, “She is grieving Daulyin. Give her time.” But Toursen noticed the thin line of her tight lips when she thought she watched alone.

Kuen did nothing. For a long time she just sat. It was not meditation. Other times she just lay on a huge, canted slab of old temple floor, staring at the sky, or with her eyes closed. At times, she was as still as many of the bodies he had seen. He would hold his breath to wait and see if she was still breathing.

Dhatu Tiagis was standing beside him some time during the second week of watching. “It is as if she has joined our friends underground,” he said. The years of grief they shared was laden in his near whispered words.

Toursen turned to him, nodded, and decided he would not let her merely wait for death that he doubted would ever come to her. Tiagis had only voiced the fear their whole land surely felt. He asked for others to stop watching, to give Kuen some time. He would watch for them all. He waited for a time when Laugin was busy at her own hut, far down the mountain.

He came laden with some fruits, including the white Yernet berries that could be found throughout the jungle, and nowhere else. He brought them, feeling as if he were bringing her an offering, and hoped she knew it as an offering of friendship.

“*Yinasen*, Kuen,” he said to the woman lying on a slab of a ruined temple floor.

Her shoulders flinched at the term, which meant, ‘Peace among enemies.’ But that, in this land, was what he had been.

“There is no one in the temple,” she said.

“There is you.”

She opened her eyes. “Did you bring me to the right place? Is there another temple with a similar name?”

“You are where you should be. Where Daulyin asked you to go.”

She closed her eyes again. He waited for her to speak. She did not.

“I have brought you some food.”

“Thank you,” she said, and slowly sat up.

He handed her the berries. She ate the small white beads of fruit slowly. One by one. As if eating were foreign.

“They grow throughout the understory,” he said.

“I remember seeing one of the bushes.”

“Yes?”

“I thought they were like stars in the dark of the jungle’s shadows.” She paused and ate berries. “They reminded me of the night I sometimes see when I close my eyes. A landscape of stars that do not move like the ones in the heavens. Do you see stars when you close your eyes?” she asked.

He shook his head. “The echo of light, sometimes, from the fire if I’ve looked at it. I do not often look at a fire in the night, so that I can see into the shadows.”

She considered him. “Always wary, are you?”

“Every moment.”

She ate berry after berry. And then would not eat more.

“How will you live, now? What will you do?” he asked her.

She shrugged shoulders that seemed to be dragged down. The grief and failure in them made him wonder if she'd ever lifted a sword. "I need a place to sleep," she said. "Can I come to where you live?"

He shook his head. "No, Kuen. You must live here."

"Surely there is some village in this jungle that would take me."

"No, Kuen. You must live here."

She said nothing, and he thought she looked as if she wanted to lay down.

"Up here there are trees that produce resin used in incense. Shall I show you how to collect it? I have men who sell it in outer lands, where we also gather news."

"So your people leave this jungle?"

"In disguise."

She thought for a moment, slowly ate another berry. "Will you bring me news of Tamas, and the temple where I grew up?"

"Of course."

It took a day, but she had strength to follow him the next morning, after she'd eaten. As he showed her the resin trees, he also showed her more of the bounty of the jungle. She was a quick student. It was clear that much of what she'd been taught was useless in the jungle, but some of what she'd been given finally had context. Descriptions of plants she'd never seen, as well as animals and birds.

But even gathering resin over the following weeks, Toursen despaired. Over time, Kuen's hair slowly grew, and grew long. She made no indication that she would ever touch her *kampilan* again, though she kept the *talibong* she'd been trained with—one could not get through a jungle without some sort of knife.

He also knew that others came to visit her. He noticed a cook pot he recognized from Laughin's fires. When her clothing became tattered, she had a new one from a weaver from the coast. There were gifts of tea, and other things. He noticed that she was not overwhelmed with offerings. She had, even with him, politely declined more than her work gathering resin could pay for. And they all quickly learned, as he did, that she would not speak of Daulyin. When her mentor was mentioned by the few who knew her, Kuen would go still, and stare off in the distance.

They all noticed that she did not laugh, and she did not weep. Toursen noticed that even while she moved and ate and slept, it was little better than her prior grief. She still did not act.

Their enemy was not so quiet.

After Quoros' attack on the city of Tamas, he went along the borders of the jungle and attacked other towns and cities in Tieryasen, being especially destructive of any temple of Red Nuns. He claimed the country for Emperor Fawala, since that poor country had no other allies, locked between Petyin and the jungle. He was expelled in Bouyask, after the destruction of temples that housed Red Nuns that had been Quoros' primary targets. There were countries beyond Bouyask that could give aid, as well as ones that bordered Bouyask and Petyin that were happy to array armies against Quoros and Fawala. When he ventured into Petyin, an ally became Quoros' prey. His campaign in the south was yet more destructive, and that country became part of Emperor Fawala's empire.

Toursen could see that Quoros was systematically trapping Kuen inside the jungle. He wondered how much the man knew or guessed. There was a reason that no child, till their initiation or even after, knew who their parents were. Not only to treat them all as equals, but to protect sovereign heirs. It was an easy supposition to believe Quoros may have guessed who

Kuen was. However Toursen also knew Quoros well enough to know that decimating temples that the Kuenyinsen had been instrumental in supporting and creating could easily be a venting of the man's spleen.

The threat of war loomed at their borders, though Fawala's stayed his hand, keeping Quoros from sending more than a few squads or platoons to worry them. The few men Quoros sent into the jungle died. Quoros stopped sending them for a time; there was a rumor that Fawala did not like feeding the jungle dead men. But spies, soldiers, or questing noblemen were not allowed to live. No one living in the jungle could allow it, not for any of the treasure they knew to be lost under the jungle. Though that was not what all able men or women guarded. It was not even Kuen that they guarded.

Out of all the groups of either enemies or questing men, only one prince was suffered to live, for they needed one Heir of the White Wind to survive in the jungle, especially now that Kuen was here. All others died.

And Toursen watched Kuen's hair grow, and her grief and shame unlifted. He watched for two months, seven, then two years, and six. He discovered that even though Quoros' attacks were burdens, a hope that lay in state was unbearable. He had become comfortable with grief, he discovered. Now it woke anew.

He helped watch the borders, waiting to see what Quoros would do. He watched Kuen, and for the opportunity to help her as best he could. He felt helpless as she pretended to live.

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