

Chapter 1

A guard burst into the council meeting, barely waiting until the doors were pulled closed to speak. “Zalona has fallen to the Nacashans.”

Gibora sank back into the throne, losing all control over her visage. Her hand reached to fiddle with one of the three royal pendants around her neck before she caught herself.

Thank goodness he waited until the doors were closed. If the people learned their last accessible ally had fallen, the fortress would be filled with panic.

No one spoke, yet the flickering torchlight revealed all the council members wore the same dismayed expression. The panting guard braced himself against his knee with only one hand, holding out the paper in the other as if it would poison him. Gibora gathered her composure as best she could.

“Does the message come from the Zalonans?” she rasped.

The guard woefully shook his head. “A messenger brought it, saying a dragon rider had dropped it over the Goyelite camp at the front. There—is more to the message.”

“Boasting of their conquest and promising the same fate to us no doubt,” one of the generals muttered.

Gibora set her jaw. “Bring it to me,” she ordered in her strongest voice.

The guard hastily placed the paper in her hands, clearly relieved to be rid of the dreadful object. Gibora clutched the paper ever tighter as she read the evil words.

Zalona has fallen to the Nacashans. Soon all the lands of the east and all of Eretz will come to their rightful place in the great Nacashan empire. Do not think any in the west can escape your fate as you have in the past. The cargo ships you were so eagerly waiting on have been turned into a bonfire. Goyel will either surrender to the might of the Nacashans or fall. None shall be spared unless you submit. A life of slavery will be light compared to the slow deaths we will bring. The Nacashan Empire will conquer the world that is owed us through the might given them by the powerful Dragoba. Hail to the god of war!

By the time she reached the end, Gibora's vision had turned red. The seal of a dragon curled around a sword hilt seemed to mock her. The light from the braziers on either side of the throne caught her attention. Without a thought, her hands sprung into action. She tore the paper over and over again and tossed the small pieces into the fire. She watched the paper burn, watched until the seal melted, before turning back to the people around her.

"Goyel will not surrender to the Nacashans," she growled. She paused.

Deep breaths. Now is not the time for a warrior. They are looking for hopeful solutions.

Willing calmness into her voice, she began again. "We have withstood Nacash in the past, and we will again. Yes, this is the hardest fight we have ever had with them, but that does not mean it is impossible. Especially when we know Who fights for us. They can claim all the power they want in their false idol, but the all-powerful Abbakol is on our side."

She scanned the room, hoping for a difference. Some took heart at her words, but the rest remained grim.

“Your majesty, with all due respect, we must view our circumstances and act accordingly,” Steward Jaakobah spoke. “Our entire country is infested with dragon-riding Nacashans. All that remains of our people who are not maintaining a stand against them are hidden away in this fortress or elsewhere among the mountains and wilds. We can not grow crops in this rocky region and are running low on supplies. And the southern and eastern lands around us have either fallen or aligned with our enemy. Now the latest shipment of goods and weapons from Zalona we were waiting on have been captured, leaving us with dwindling supplies and defenses. Abbakol is indeed on our side, praise be—or else we would not have survived this long. Yet, we can not simply sit here, nor do we have the means to drive back our enemy.”

“There are others we can reach out to.” Gibora rose and began to pace. She kept her steps sure and steady while her mind frantically searched for a solution.

Earninlen is already using up everything they have to maintain their valiant fight along our upper border. They are the closest of the northern allies. No other nation across the sea will be able to get through now. That only leaves one nation within reach.

“Regarding both issues of our resources,” she finally spoke, “Gentovia may be farther behind in the grand scale of weaponry, but they are still far more sheltered and can provide multiple avenues of aid. We may yet still be able to replenish our dwindling defenses. It will be more difficult for them to replicate the spear catapults promised by Zalona, but it can be achieved.”

Heads immediately shook at the mention of the pacifist nation's name. Gibora fought to conceal her annoyance that the steward was one of them.

“Why would they give us such weapons, after all their years of remaining happily secluded from this war by the Ancient Forest's boundary?”

“Will such defenses still be effective enough when the Nacashans redirect their full attention to us and all of the west now that they have conquered all of the eastern land?” a noble asked.

“Not all of the east beyond the sea has fallen. The Nacashans would not have hesitated to boast of conquering all of the continent had they done so,” Gibora reminded them.

“For now,” Jaakobah cautiously spoke. “I fear it will not be long before the last free nation we know of falls under the direct attack now from all sides. And our allies to the north have stretched out what remains of their resources to confirm the spies' reports of the Nacashans' growing force, both in size and strength. We can barely hold them off with the dragons spewing down upon us as our surrounding enemies increase, not to mention these new fighters they have trained in arts of darkness.”

“Then what do you suggest, Steward Jaakobah?” Gibora grit out, resisting the urge to pull on the brown braid draped over her shoulder. “We are all well aware of the strength of our enemy, so unless you are actually recommending surrender, I see no point to continue to reiterate it.”

Jaakobah spread out his hands. “I assure you, I am not suggesting we throw down arms and swing wide the gates. I am stating that we can not look to our northern allies for saving. We must look within and strategize.”

“Yet you also reminded us of how little we have left for resources or advantages.”

“Still, do you truly think Gentovia can be convinced to put aside their pacifism when they have never had any attacks from even any of the countries bordering us who have aligned with the Nacashan Empire?”

Gibora paused and met the gaze of everyone standing in the room. “I believe that it is our best chance. When Gentovia learns that we are all that keep the Nacashan Empire from their country, they will surely see sense in aiding us.”

Seeing they were still not convinced, Gibora returned to her throne. Since they refused to listen to their queen, there was one person everyone heeded more than the steward. “Send for Toru, and fill his position on the walls with whoever you can find. I will take private counsel from him and inform you of his wisdom concerning the matter. In the meantime, until a decision is reached, not a word of this news is to be said to anyone outside of this room.”

At the mention of the renowned scholar and warrior's name, everyone agreed and filed out of the room, their normal whispering absent. The doors thudded shut as if sealing her in a tomb.

Gibora waited until they were gone before letting her composure crumble. The windowless stone room matched her gloomy mood. She rubbed at her temples, frantic thoughts running rampant in her mind.

Jaakobah is right. I don't want him to be, but he is. If Gentovia rejects a treaty, we're doomed.

She reached up and placed the crown in her lap, but its removal did nothing to alleviate the pounding in her forehead. The circlet blurred as memories of why it sat on her head now pushed to the front of her mind. Gibora tried to mentally shove them away, squeezing her eyes shut, but the tears would not stop filling them. Her hand drifted up to the two extra royal pendants that hung around her neck.

“Father, Aaron, if you can hear me—I wish you were both here,” she whispered. “I wish Abbakol had not taken either of you yet.”

Her conscience pricked her for her words. She knew it was the evil one's work that had stolen the lives of them both. Abbakol's will never failed, but that just made her chest ache even more. “Forgive me, God above. I simply do not know why You would will for me to sit in their place in these times,” she choked out.

Gibora gasped for air, opening her eyes and letting the tears spill out. She had to collect herself before Toru arrived. Even if he was an old friend, any passerby could catch a glimpse of their queen before the doors were closed. The Goyelites needed a queen who was strong in these hard times. Just as she finished wiping her face, the doors opened. She swiftly straightened, but it was too late to reset the crown on her head. At least she appeared formal enough for Toru to not detect anything as he entered.

“You sent for me, your majesty?” His discerning gaze scanned her. There must have been a slip in Gibora's mask, for his oval eyes narrowed.

Gibora waited until the doors had fully closed. “Zalona has fallen.”

Understanding dawned on his face. “The weapons and supplies did not make it through.”

Gibora nodded. “I need your words of wisdom yet again, my friend. The people will panic when they learn of this. They need the comfort of some kind of aid to overcome the obstacles we are facing. I am in favor of entreating supplies and defenses from Gentovia, but others—understandably—are opposed of doing so, due to their uninvolvedness throughout this and previous wars. What do you think?”

Toru pulled and fiddled with his thin mustache, signaling he was deep in thought. Gibora waited in complete silence while sending up half-finished prayers that a solution would be revealed. At length, Toru met her gaze.

“The concern is what would convince the Gentovians to attempt such a thing, wholeheartedly working to achieve this goal, when they are convinced they are sheltered by the Ancient Forest's natural and infamous boundary.”

Gibora huffed. “The only ones who are still willing to believe in myths and legends are simply superstitious like the Nacashans. Children's stories should not interfere with national decisions. As for convincing them, if the fact that we are all that stands in the east against Nacash's worldwide rampage is not enough, we could offer a gift of what jewels and gold are left in the stronghold—or a political alliance.”

“Though we have taken in several refugees over many years, which I myself am grateful for, a royal marriage to outsiders would nullify Goyel's independence as a kingdom with your position as queen,” Toru cautioned.

“We will just have convince them with sense and what few treasures remain, then. Once Gentovia is convinced, they would be likely to send weaponry to us as well as supplies since this stronghold will better protect their own land.”

Toru considered this, eventually nodding in approval. “Word to Gentovia of our offer will have to be sent before telling the people if we are to avoid chaos ensuing. They will wonder at the silence, and we will have to let them know the Nacashans sent another threat to explain the message everyone will have seen the guard delivering. The people should remain calm until word returns from Gentovia, at which point matters will be made known and they will see that you are working toward a solution in confidence. Provided Gentovia is willing to negotiate.”

"I know there is still a chance they could outright refuse to hear us, but I see no way they could ignore this most recent news. Unfortunately, my Gentovian is almost nonexistent anymore. It is still one of the languages you are able to speak, correct? Would you accompany me as translator? I know your rotation to the front lines is due by the end of the month, but I can have you shifted to the next one if you are willing."

A hint of a smile flickered on Toru's ever serious face. "You know that I would. Even if not as translator, as a guard. Wherever the ruler of Goyel goes, I will follow."

Gibora breathed easier as everything settled into place. "Thank you, Toru. Your wisdom is unceasing."

Toru bowed, yet lingered. "You were thinking of them again, weren't you?"

Gibora's eyes burned. *Curse these stubborn tears.*

"Father always seemed to know what to do," she whispered, no longer able to look at her friend. "And Aaron was a born leader. I can't help but think that if either one of them was still with us, things might be different."

"Do not let your grief blind you to the fact that you are as excellent a ruler as they were. I know it has not been long, but ever since you took up the crown, you have managed to keep Goyel standing and continue to give the people all the encouragement you can."

"Encouragement is all I am good for right now. As grating as the councilors' and nobles' cautions are against me returning to the war front, they are probably right in fearing I would fall."

Toru held out his arm so the tip of his scar would show. "This is another reason why I go. Not only do I not fear going wherever my queen and friend goes, but also I will not fail again. So long as I serve, Goyel will not lose another ruler."

"You have never failed us. The entire family may very well have fallen if my father had not placed you among the guards

escorting us to the fortress. And it was not your fault that my brother fell in battle. If anyone is to blame for Aaron's death, it's me." Gibora watched Toru's expression shift, knowing it was the first time she had voiced this thought to anyone.

"Take the time to mourn them both, your majesty," he finally spoke. "Goyel may have lost two rulers in six months, but you lost more than that."

Gibora stared straight ahead. "I will mourn them when there is time. For now, I will honor their memories by keeping our people out of the hands of the enemy."

Toru remained silent. He bowed again and headed for the doors. With a hand on the handle, he looked back at her with a friend's concern. "I will continue my prayers for you and your family." The door closed without a single noise as he left.

Gibora fought for her mask of composure to slam back into place, forcing the swirling emotions back into a bottle and burying it down deep. Once she felt a picture of calmness again, she rose and left for the fortress sanctuary. Even if her prayers remained unanswered as they had been lately, it would do her soul good to try and force her emotions to be quieter. At least, that's what her mother would say, and she was ever a comfort. She could not slip again when discussing matters further with the councilors and nobles.

The moment she exited the throne room, Gibora entered a crowd of people. Groups huddled together in dim corners or as they passed by, creating a steady stream of mankind in both directions of the long dark corridors. Servants or soldiers wove in and out among them, hastening on their tasks, yet the latter had an easier time as the people made an effort to move out of their way.

If only I could leave the crown in the throne room and traverse the fortress as a mere warrior again—Stop. No more

thinking about it. The whole point of this is to get back into a strong frame of mind.

Squaring her shoulders and holding her head high, she entered the stream of people who instantly paused at the sight of her. The guards made to follow, but Gibora waved them away. There was no danger within the walls of the fortress, and she wanted her people to see her as truly among them, even if it did slow her journey.

Every time she passed by a Goyelite, she was acknowledged with a quiet “your majesty” and bow. Some refugees who had been able to cross Goyel's northern border before it became too dangerous respectfully nodded while others just stared. Gibora nodded in response to as many people as she could, even as she chafed at how much it hindered a simple trek through the fortress.

As she passed the doors to the healing ward, a stretcher started being inched into the hall. She froze, her body refusing to let her move until it came fully into view.

Please be alive...

Her body relaxed when an uncovered and alert face was revealed. The obvious splint on his leg mocked the worry she hid from the crowd. They were simply transporting him to his family or the barracks to make more room for incoming wounded. Heart clenching, she noted he kept the left side of his face pressed against the stretcher and hidden from sight.

Gibora drew closer, causing the stretcher bearers to pause. She placed her hand on his shoulder. “Rest well, noble warrior.”

The soldier hesitantly turned his head, revealing large burns on his face. Gibora did not wince or even blink.

“You have made your country proud.”

The soldier's eyes glistened with unshed tears. His bandaged hand grasped hers. “Thank you,” he whispered. His

voice grew in volume as the hardiness returned to his body. "I will fight again for Goyel soon."

"The kingdom is grateful for your valliancy." Gibora backed away from the stretcher, pleased that the soldier looked brighter as he was carried away. She gave a simple nod to the onwatchers and carried on her way, continuing to respond to greetings along the way.

She discreetly checked to make sure the oversized crown was still straight as she passed through the crowded halls. The ache in her head spread into her neck as she continued to acknowledge her people, yet she pushed through it. Once she drew near the sanctuary, she was forced to slow further and even step over seated groups of people, despite their efforts to make way for her.

The priest's chanting brought a soothing calm to her racing worries. Gibora breathed in the incense burning from the altar and felt her mind finally still. Sliding past two more large groups, she reached the crowded entrance.

"Excuse me, but I believe my mother is inside."

Once Gibora announced her presence, the people shuffled aside enough for her to enter. Gibora thanked them and edged in among the throngs of kneeling figures, her eyes soaking in the faint sunlight filtering through the extra air vents. She did not bother searching for her mother, knowing her to be in her usual spot near the front. Gibora approached the altar just as the priest finished his chant. She genuflected, making sure to keep her neck and head stiff so the crown would not roll off again as it had the first time. She rose long enough to bow to the priest and shuffled next to her praying mother. The stone floor bit into her knees, and the smoke from the burning incense that refused to pass through the air shafts made everything hazy. Yet, this was as close to home as the capitol's castle had been.

Gibora folded her hands and spent several minutes simply breathing before sending up her appeal. *Abbakol, You are all-powerful and all-knowing. You see my people's—Your chosen people's—plight. Our enemy threatens to make an end of us. We have lost the help promised to us to push back the Nacashans. I do not believe you would have us be a wandering people as our ancestors were before You made us great, for you are a good God.* Tears pricked her eyes yet again as her spirit warred with her heart. Her mind knew the words she prayed were true yet was keenly aware of the absence of her devout father and brother.

She took another deep breath of incense and continued. *I can not lead these people or defeat the Nacashans on my own. Please help us. We ask You to fight back this evil on our behalf and guide us through this war so we do not become a broken lost people. Please give us victory over our foe. We call upon Your name to save us all. All glory be to Abbakol.*

Gibora kept her eyes closed and waited for some kind of feeling or sense of being heard to flicker within her. Yet, after several long minutes of the priest reading from the Holy Word, nothing changed within her. Frustration welled up within her. She needed assurance that Abbakol had at least heard her. Gibora felt her mother's hand on her shoulder and used every ounce of strength within her to meet her mother's gaze as a picture of peace. Her mother motioned to the door with a gentle smile. Gibora nodded, and the two shuffled out.

"Are you sure you wish to leave?" Gibora whispered when they reached the entrance.

"I was there long enough. It was time to give someone else a turn. Besides, it is not often you come to the sanctuary anymore. Is everything all right?"

Gibora looked around at the people who could clearly hear their conversation despite their lowered tones. "I'm sorry,

Mother. I know I should come to the sanctuary more often, but I have been busy lately.”

“I know you have, fervently fighting the battle of running our country. Has there been word from Zalona?”

“No,” Gibora replied, grateful that she could answer her mother honestly. “The Nacashans sent more threats.”

Understanding dawned on her mother's face. She linked her arm with Gibora's and led her in the direction of the private rooms. “More of the same or anything original?”

“Oh—you know how they are. It's infuriating to read every time.”

“I'm sure. But, Abbakol willing, we will not have to read or hear such things forever.”

Gibora hummed a response, grateful the people around them left them to their conversation as they passed. “It's grating to sit inside the fortress when reading their messages makes me want to march straight to the front lines and physically make a difference.”

Her mother patted her arm. “I know the transition from battlefield to politics has been challenging for you. You must remember your decisions are making a difference, even if you do not make them with your sword.”

“Much slower, but yes.” Gibora noted they were near the private rooms reserved for nobles and royalty. “I will see you to the family's chambers before I return to another meeting.”

“Come inside for a moment. You clearly need a break, and the rest of the family would be glad to see you a bit more.”

Gibora withheld a sigh, lest her mother misinterpret. Another part of sitting on the throne during wartime equaled less time with loved ones. Halting that trail of thoughts before they returned to her brother, she wrestled her focus back on her mother. “I can only do so for a brief moment. Some of the reports from the surviving spies still need examining.”

“Even a brief moment will bring them great joy, and possibly cheer you as well.”

Gibora relented and tried to conceal her gratitude when they stepped out of the stream of people into the quieter hallway. Only some servants came and went at this time of day from the other rooms that led to the royal quarters. Upon entering the family room, Gibora's younger sister and brother shot to their feet, and her grandfather straightened in his chair.

“Gibora, you're here! Look, Grandfather and I repaired ten whole quivers of arrows for the men.” Her brother proudly held up a finished bundle.

“I'm almost finished mending my pile of tunics,” her sister added quietly.

Gibora managed to give her siblings a genuine smile. “You're both a great help to Goyel.”

“You're back rather early,” her sister noted. “Are your duties done for the day?”

“Not yet, Naomi. I was just seeing Mother back after visiting the sanctuary.”

“Did something happen?” her brother asked. “You never visit the sanctuary in the middle of the day.”

Gibora withheld grimace. Now he looked worried. And he had a good point.

Maybe Abbakol would hear my prayers if they were more frequent and I more devout.

“I just needed a break. Receiving threats and not being able to physically fight them off irritates me, and I don't think the councilors and nobles like being growled at.”

“What kind of threats now?”

“Now, now, Hartov,” Grandfather spoke up. “Gibora is trying to forget them for a moment while working to ensure they

do not have any grounds. Let us give her respite while she is here.”

Both siblings returned to their grandfather's side, subdued and quiet.

“Nothing you need worry about so long as I have anything to say about it,” Gibora assured them, though it felt halfhearted. At least it brightened her brother's countenance. Naomi's eyes probed, but she remained silent.

“If you need me to join you in there today, let me know,” Grandfather offered.

A laugh huffed out of Gibora before she could hold it back. “To add your own growls?”

Grandfather raised his eyebrows. “I only growl when necessary among those hardheaded nobles. If they have already forgotten my growls from last week, they are going deaf.”

“There are still sage councilors who deserve respect,” Mother spoke up. “They simply do not feel the need to speak as loudly.”

“There would be no such need if those with less experience would listen. Why every noble felt the need to become part of what is supposed to be a council of wisdom is beyond me.”

Gibora wistfully thought of how much faster things would progress with fewer disapproving councilors. “I do not wish to speak ill of any of our people, but I agree with Grandfather. I would much rather listen to...a small council with fewer voices.”

“You mean like Father did?”

Gibora mentally kicked herself. She should never have slipped to begin with. Now she was dragging her family members down when they needed what hope they could find.

“Your father had less councilors because he had been ruler for longer,” Mother quietly replied before Gibora could think of anything to say. “His heart and mind were for the people,

and his wisdom sound. And he trained both your brother, Aaron, and your sister well to take his place.” She smiled, but Gibora could see the extra shimmer in her eyes. “Eventually, you will be able to downsize the council.”

“Thank you, Mother.” In an attempt to lighten the mood in her family's quarters, Gibora made a face. “Though I'm sure I'll still hear from them long after due to their offense.”

Grandfather humphed. “You have more important things to do than listen to the whining of soft nobles. Just send them my way when that happens. The word of the Zehev bloodline still holds weight.”

Gibora glanced at Mother. It had been several generations before Gibora's father had resumed the tradition of the royal Aryeyh bloodline marrying from the Zehev out of all the ancient tribes. Of course, everyone in the family knew he had only done so after falling in love with her mother.

“I will definitely take you up on that.”

Grandfather opened his mouth to say more, but a coughing fit cut his voice off. Gibora moved faster than anyone else and poured the last of the water from the family pitcher. Mother rushed the water over to Grandfather just as his face began to turn red. He sipped between coughs, handing the cup back to Mother when they shook him until the fit passed.

“You can have my next water ration since you gave yours to Grandfather,” her brother offered to Gibora.

“Thank you, Hartov, but I'll be fine without it.”

“All this fuss over a small cold.” Grandfather waved away their hovering figures. “I'm practically recovered. Just this stubborn cough.”

“Still enough to require more rest. You can add your wisdom to the council's words again once you are back to full health, Father,” Mother reminded. “In the meantime, drink and rest your voice as much as possible.”

"I have drunk enough for now. Set the rest aside for my next ration."

"Grandfather," Gibora protested.

"Keep the rest, Grandfather. Gibora can have mine. Or, since she's queen, take a mouthful from the well."

"Absolutely not. The rations apply to every one of us until the war is over. I will be fine for the evening." Gibora leaned conspiratorily closer to whisper to Hartov. "I know the rations get washed down better with a drink, and I'm more used to the army-style food."

"I'll get used to it too. I'll have to at some point anyway when I turn old enough."

Gibora's gut twisted. Past images of the fiery and bloody battles she had witnessed flashed before her eyes. "Not for several years yet." She forced a lighter tone into her voice. "Besides, the war will be over by then, and even army rations will be better at that point."

Hartov hesitated. "Will it? It feels like it's been going on forever."

"All wars have ends. And I will see this one finished, no matter what." Gibora straightened with new resolve and checked the angle of light stretching through the lone arrow slit that substituted a window. "Which I must get back to working on. The council will undoubtedly be growing impatient by now."

"I assume we will not see you again today," Mother stated softly.

"I'll be back late again most likely." Gibora gave her best smile to her siblings. "Keep up your good work, you two."

Both her sister and brother clustered together to give her silent hugs. Gibora kissed Grandfather's cheek, hoping he could hear the thanks in her action, before striding to the door.

“Don't forget, Gibora, Abbakol is ever with you,” Mother emphasized.

“And His guidance will pull you through the most uncertain of times,” Grandfather added, a knowing look on his face.

Gibora nodded her thanks, adjusted her crown again, and headed back for the throne room as a picture of a perfect queen.

Chapter 2

Gibora sighed with relief as she removed the crown and set it on its pillow. Her head felt lighter, though the phantom feeling of metal on her scalp lingered. Just as the most recently returned spy's ravings lingered in her mind. She still could not decipher what he had meant by "darkness bearers," as he had kept babbling before having to be removed from the room. The pounding ache from the tense meeting still wrapped around her head, but she showed no sign to her mother or grandfather.

"Come, dear, you must be hungry." Her mother tugged Gibora out of her room to her seat at the small table.

"Thank you, Mother. Where are Hartov and Naomi?"

"I sent Naomi to the wells for the evening water. Hartov said he would help her carry the jar. And we all wanted to eat with you tonight."

"It's late," Gibora protested, even as her heart warmed. "You all must be so hungry." Guilt instantly pricked her over how long she had taken planning with the council.

"We are stronger in hard times with each other. We are grateful for everything you are doing for our nation. Now let us do something for and with you."

Gibora eased into the low chair, grateful anew that the wells were underground within the fortress. Her siblings would be walking completely in the dark, otherwise. Mother removed

the rations from the warmth of the hearth, and Grandfather sat beside her.

“Your brother and sister will not be much longer. Gibora, can you tell us what happened today? I heard Toru was called upon.”

Gibora hesitated. Both her mother and he were still royalty, yet part of her held back from sharing such dismal news just yet.

“If word is not supposed to spread, you need not worry about us doing so.” Mother reached out and took her hand. “We simply do not want you to bear this burden alone.”

Perhaps it is best the two of them knew in advance before my departure for Gentovia is secured.

Gibora glanced at the door, knowing her siblings could return at any moment. Deciding it was for the best, Gibora gave in. “The message from the Nacashans was a boast. They have conquered Zalona.”

Her mother and grandfather's expressions of horror made her instantly regret telling them. Yet, at the same time, it was a relief that they knew.

“What of the shipment?” Grandfather asked.

Gibora simply shook her head. She avoided meeting either one of their eyes, knowing if she saw their worry some of her own would slip out.

“What have you planned in response?” Mother whispered.

“We have sent a message to Gentovia. Toru and I discussed our best course of action in order to secure their aid. Without it we will not last more than two years, and that is with Ab-bakol's divine favor. Word is not to spread to the people until we hear from Gentovia,” Gibora emphasized.

At least the majority of the council had agreed with her on that matter, even if others, including Steward Jaakobah insisted they should be open with the people.

“As far as anyone else is concerned, the Nacashan message was more threats—which were included anyway—and as soon as word returns from Gentovia, I will be meeting with them personally to negotiate. At least I can do that much.”

Hartov and Naomi returned at that moment, and all conversation stopped. Gibora glued her eyes to her plate, as if that would defuse the tension in the room. Mother thanked both the siblings and poured everyone a cup. Gibora could feel their questioning gazes from across the table. Grandfather blessed the food, yet no one took a bite.

“What were you talking about before we came in?” Naomi asked.

“What did you hear?” Mother questioned.

“Something about Gibora leaving for Gentovia. Would you really have to go to negotiate with them?” Hartov asked.

Gibora sighed and picked at her plate. “It will make things faster in the long run. There are always areas that are debated, even in compromises, during negotiations. And we would have to be face to face to finalize an agreement anyway.”

“It's not fair that they won't just help as it is. Word has definitely reached them of how wide the Nacashans' aim is by now. Do they really think they can hide away forever?”

“Goyel has known war for much of its existence. Gentovia can barely remember their last war.” Gibora shrugged helplessly. “And the Nacashans have always been our enemy. Pair that with the Gentovians ever viewing themselves as the most advanced and civilized of the countries around us, they view the threat of the Nacashans as our mess. Such is the world we live in. Though I wish it was different, especially for your sakes.”

“We know you're trying everything and doing everything you can for everyone,” Naomi replied.

“Well then, I think that is enough serious talk for one night,” Grandfather interrupted. “Times are dire enough without excessive dwelling on them. Perhaps we could remember a different time when things were better for Goyel.”

“Those memories usually leave us feeling sad,” Hartov murmured.

“What if we go farther back? Back when humans were not the only living beings to walk the earth?”

“It has been quite some time since we all heard those stories,” Mother encouraged.

Gibora breathed easier seeing Hartov's face lighten at the mention of his favorite stories. She caught Naomi's attention and nodded in Hartov's direction, mouthing “every time” with exaggerated eyebrows. Naomi brightened as she giggled under her breath.

Grandfather leaned back in his chair, polishing off his plate with two more large bites. Gibora attempted to subtly shift some of her food onto his plate, but his hand batted hers back without him even looking in her direction. He side-eyed her as he began the story and nodded to her own barely touched plate. Accepting defeat, Gibora forced the food into her mouth one bite at a time. She knew her body needed the fuel, especially when she had already been barely eating her rations while Grandfather had not yet begun to recover.

If only I could at least improve the quantity of these rations for my family. For my people as a whole, at that. She focused her mind on Grandfather's words, knowing if she allowed it to wander she would lose herself to worry.

“Long ago, when Eretz was newly made, Abbakol sent helpers into the world to aid humans to stand against the Evil One and his forces of darkness. For though humans had limitations, the reach of Rasha knew no bounds as he grasped to gain dominion over the earth. Terrible creatures and beasts

bred from his hatred and vileness roamed air, land, and sea. Humans faced destruction, until Abbakol sent the Mistotzs.

“Human-like yet bound to only certain parts of the world, the Mistotzs each took their stand alongside humans. Elves and Nymphs not only fought throughout the land but also restored life where the enemy had destroyed. Dwarves guarded the realms underground while Mer patrolled the oceans and protected ships. And Fae, occasionally known as Sprites, walked with men as ever present beacons of light against the roaming servants of darkness.

“Millenia passed with Mistotzs and humans dwelling side by side. Yet, ever slowly, the Mistotzs began to dwindle and vanish from the land. Our home, Goyel, was one of the last places they were ever seen in all of Eretz. At length, the day came when no one could find any Mistotzs anywhere.”

“What happened to them?” Hartov asked, as if he had never heard the legend before. “If they were real, there must have been a reason why they vanished,” he added.

Gibora restrained a sigh. Earlier, she had scoffed at the mention of these children's tales. Now she wished to infuse them into Hartov before he matured further. It became more apparent every day that, despite her best efforts, he had already begun to grow up before his time. She doubted there was anything else she could do for her sister, who had grown up overnight after the loss of Aaron, but had hoped she could stave off such a fate for her remaining brother. Gibora's eyes pricked with fresh tears, and she wrenched her thoughts back to the present before anyone noticed.

“That, like so much of the knowledge of them, remains a mystery,” Grandfather continued. “Some say that their task was done, and they either died out or were called back to Abbakol's heavenly lands. Others suggested that it was because humans took them for granted that they left. A rare few claim

they all turned to the darkness they once fought so hard to keep at bay, believing their powers to come from heathen sources, though most agree on the former.”

“I still find that hard to believe if they truly fought so long against it.”

“All things in this world can be corrupted, even the purest of creations. Sometimes the creatures the Mistotzs fought against were indeed once their own kind, won over by the Terrible Enemy and transformed into carriers of darkness—Ielee and Dokfars, Magorgs, Sirens, and Kearea. They too disappeared around the same time, leaving many to wonder if they had been wiped out by Mistotzs, for surely mankind could never become stronger than them. Mistotzs were claimed to be spotted roaming through the lands long after Dark Ones vanished. Some find it so hard to believe that either one of such powerful groups could have died out that they claim both to still roam the ancient parts of the world.”

“Like the Ancient Forest between us and Gentovia.”

Grandfather nodded. “Even after the Mistotzs and the Dark Ones departed from the human world, people would still vanish into the forest and never be seen again. Even groups were not safe, and travel through those parts was abandoned entirely. Yet, some claimed to see Elves, not Dokfars, roaming the edge of the forest as they passed by. It is possible the age old battle between good and evil continues still between the Mistotzs and Dark Ones to this day, out in the wildernesses of the world.”

“It would be nice if they did. We could call upon them for aid and beat the Nacashans once and for all,” Hartov muttered. “Where would we find them?”

“As if you don't already know,” Gibora teased, secretly thrilled when he stuck his tongue out at her.

“I want to hear it again!”

“Well, even when they walked among humans, they all had places of retreat, hidden from all but them. The Fae had more than one island that was impossible to find except by Mer, who had the entire oceans at their disposal. The Dwarves had sprawling caverns beneath the mountains they could seal off as if they were never there. Elves and Nymphs could always make habitation out of areas that were too rough and wild for humans to even reach. Who knows? They may very well still be out there, hidden away and waiting for the time to come when they return to mankind's world. We may never know, unless someone chooses to be the first to find them.”

“I would gladly be the first one! Remind me what to look for, Grandfather,” Hartov urged as he shoveled food into his mouth.

“Alas, they vanished so long ago little is even remembered of them. Yet, a few claim that the Nymphs had skin of bark, and the Dwarves had bodies of stone. There were even those who claimed the Fae walked with a glow about them, and it was rumored that they were actual angels revealing themselves to men and walking among them.” Grandfather chuckled. “Yet, far more were ever insistent that the Fae were indeed something else entirely. No one ever truly knew what to make of the Mistotzs, no matter how often they aided humans.”

“I would be glad to see one,” Naomi confessed. “So long as it was really a Mistotz.”

“Oh, one could always tell the difference between Mistotzs and Dark Ones. Dark terrible forms are always clearly distinguishable from the beings of light and goodness.”

“Then I'm sure I would be able to find at least one Elf in the Ancient Forest,” Hartov decided. “When you leave for Gentovia, may I go with you, Gibora? I promise it won't take long.”

Gibora met the eyes of her brother, knowing he desperately wanted to help. Yet her heart lodged in her throat at the thought of him leaving the safety of the fortress. "We wouldn't be able to turn aside along the way, Hartov."

"On the way back then? Please? I'll keep up the whole way."

"We all know our friend Toru to be like one of the Fae of old," Gibora repeated the comparison that had often reached her ears. "Both his unfailing wisdom and unceasing protection put him as Fae-like as any human can get."

"It's not the same as a real Mistotz. I promise I won't be a hindrance."

Gibora looked to her mother for aid, who was just as wide-eyed as her. Her mother quickly concealed her concern with a smile. "I had hoped you would be staying here to help me with seeing off the upcoming rotation of soldiers. Should things go the way your sister hopes, you and I will have to take that over while she's gone."

Hartov's eyes betrayed the internal war within him. Gibora reached across the table and took his hand, saying the only thing that could come to mind. "Coming back, the horses could probably use a rest, and I'll have a little spare time. I'm sure it can be timed with our return to the border of the Ancient Forest. I'll see if I can't find one or two Mistotzs and, even if I can't convince them to come fight with us, bring them back for you to see."

Hartov let out a small pure whoop, and Naomi added a small cheer as well. Gibora hoped Abbakol could feel her thankfulness that some measure of joy remained to be found for her family.

"If you find an Elf, you and he could become best friends, like the second king of Goyel was!" Hartov now eeked with excitement.

“Ah, you remember that story well, do you now?” Grandfather continued to entertain her siblings with tales of the Mistotzs until everyone's plates were long empty and the fire began to dwindle.

Gibora stifled a yawn, comfortable and the most at peace she had been in the longest time. Her siblings rubbed at their eyes as Grandfather finished his last story with a cough.

“I think that is all my voice will allow for this night,” he groaned, rising stiffly from his chair. “It has been some time since we heard your prayers aloud. Would you lead us tonight, daughter?” he asked Mother.

Mother agreed as everyone moved closer to the fire. A chill still settled into the stones after sunset, and firewood, just like everything else, had to be rationed. The family gathered close together for a time of prayer before retiring for the night.

“Abbakol, we honor and call upon Your name,” Mother led. “We humbly ask of You for deliverance from our foes and protection as we fight against the evil trying to take root in our land. We ask that You will give us eyes to see the aid that You will give us in whatever form you choose to send it, for we believe that You are ever with us and will fight for us in our time of need.”

Grandfather and the other family members placed their hands on Gibora. She soaked in the comfort of their touch and Mother's prayer on her behalf. “Abbakol, all-knowing and just, we ask on behalf of our beloved family member and queen that You bestow heavenly wisdom and knowledge on Gibora. We ask that you guide her as she seeks to guide Your people to victory and freedom. We call upon Your name to aid her as well as to free us from the hands of our enemy. All glory be to Abbakol.”

“All glory be to Abbakol,” Gibora and the family echoed.

Everyone bade each other goodnight. Mother gave Gibora a hug and kissed her cheek before leading her siblings off to their beds. Grandfather gave her a hug that lingered.

"Leave the cares of the world in His hands for tonight," he whispered.

Gibora laughed under her breath. "You know me too well."

Grandfather kissed her forehead and winked like he used to when she was a child. "Sleep well."

Gibora shuffled into her room, her eyes heavy as she changed. The stones of the fireplace's back emanated the heat of the flames enough to make her nearby bed cozy. Yet as soon as she lay down, her mind began racing.

How am I going to be able to keep Hartov from growing up before his time any further? Not that I will be able to do so while I am gone. And who knows how long that will be? The negotiations with the Gentovians could take forever, and my people do not have time. What if something happens to the messenger bird before it arrived? No, it will fly over the Ancient Forest and be safe. Although it has been so long since Gentovia and Goyel exchanged word. Will the messenger bird get lost? Maybe I should go myself. The Gentovians would be forced to listen then. But the council would never approve of that.

Gibora tossed and turned along with her thoughts. Her eyes darted to and fro around the dark room as if she could find the answers written on the stones. The ache in her forehead grew back to full force as if the evening with her family had never happened.

Gibora let out a noise between a sigh and a groan, flopping onto her back. She thought to the times she had occasionally stumbled across Toru praying outside of the sanctuary and how peaceful he always looked. He would say he had been speaking with Abbaokal as if he were having a conversation

with a family member. It had made her hope that a priest was not nearby at the time, but right now she could not think of anything else to do.

“Forgive my informality, Abbakol,” she whispered. “But I need to speak with You. And not the way I normally would. I need Your help more than ever. I do not know how to find the answers my people need without another problem rising in its place.” Gibora’s breath shook. “I barely know how to navigate being queen as it is. I need Your divine help. My entire people need Your divine help. Please intervene on our behalf.”

Gibora paused. *Should I truly continue like this? Maybe I should slip back into my dress and go down to the sanctuary. But that would use up a torch to light my way since fortress lights will be out by now.* She threw her hands over her face. *Why is everything so complicated?*

“Abbakol, I need clarity. I need to be able to make a decision with nothing hindering it. I need to be able to lead the people forward. And I can’t do it by myself.”

The tears she had been holding back all day rushed back to the surface. Gibora rolled her face into the pillow, no strength left to hold them back. As expected, no longer fighting it forced her to stifle even the muffled sounds of her crying. She hoped the rest of her family was already asleep. She reined her emotions back in as it became hard to breathe and wiped at the stubborn tears that continued to leak out. At least some of the pressure was gone now. Gibora forced her breathing into a deep controlled pace. The worry remained, but she felt a semblance of relief. Between the prayer and letting go a bit, she would be able to face at least one more day of being queen without showing any weakness.



When word returned from Gentovia, Gibora wasted no time in preparing an envoy. Even though the journey to Gentovia would remain beyond enemy reach, the council was insistent on her taking more men than she felt should be spared. Yet, as always, their voices overruled. The relief of things finally being in motion after weeks of waiting caused her to agree far more quickly anyway.

Gibora strode confidently into the fortress's stone courtyard, her sheathed sword and bow thumping comfortably against her body. For once, she and the council had agreed on presenting as strong an image as possible with the entire envoy donned in their armor. The feel of her armor covering her body once more roused new strength to rise up within her.

Determination sped her feet even as her heart still felt the effects of bidding her family farewell earlier. The poised send-off she would receive did not matter as much as the enveloping hugs that had encircled her earlier. She had needed to remind herself that she was simply going on a journey instead of off to the front in order to let go of each of them. All this time away from actually fighting the war had weakened her inner steel. Gibora reminded herself of all the times she had left before under far more dire circumstances, and the warm welcome she would receive upon her return, as she took her horse's reins from Toru.

Steward Jaakobah stood next to her family, the steward's signet ring gleaming on his hand again as a signal to all that he guarded the nation until Gibora's return. All of the councilors clustered around them on the steps to see their queen off. Guards had been taken off the walls to line the way to the

gates against the swarm of people gathered to watch Gibora leave to secure their fates. It did not take long to survey that the envoy was to her satisfaction before she gave the word to Toru.

“All men, mount up!” he shouted.

The soldiers accompanying Gibora swung into their saddles in perfect sync with her. She made sure to hold her head high as she lifted a hand in farewell. A priest swung a smoking incense bowl in her direction, and Jaakobah lifted his hand.

“Abbakol's blessing be upon your journey,” he proclaimed. “May you find favor with the Gentovians and return swiftly to us with the aid that will turn the war. As the Mistotzs of old aligned with humans in legends, may this new alliance between Goyel and Gentovia form an unstoppable force against the tide of the enemy.”

Gibora bit back a groan. She wished he had not referenced the tales of Mistotzs at such a serious public matter. Especially when the people had latched onto the leaked reports of the Nacashans' newest forces, spreading rumors of those forces actually being Dark Ones. Yet, the cheers of the people stamped down her irritation. Childish as it was, it brought them hope still, and she would be the last person to deny them that. She offered a smile which encouraged them even more. So long as such stories sowed optimism instead of fear, they could run through every mouth in the fortress for all she was concerned.

The gates slowly creaked open, and Gibora nudged her horse forward. The people waved scarves and kerchiefs at her and the envoy as they rode by, their faces bright again. Gibora kept her smile up until they were out of the fortress. Her eyes strayed to the east as the gates boomed shut behind the envoy. Faint flashes of orange flickered beyond the mountains,

lighting the gray clouds where the sky met the terrain in an unnatural manner.

Memories of leaping away from flames exploding left and right gathered before her eyes. She could practically hear the cries of horses and men alike beneath shrieks from the sky. Gibora grit her teeth and faced forward, wrenching the battle flashbacks from her mind. Soon, they would secure machines that would shoot down any and every dragon that spewed down terror. She would not leave Gentovia without them. It would all end soon. It had to end.