



*The  
Luxury of  
Vengeance*

*Isabella Carter*

**Take no prisoner. Show no mercy. Trust no soul. And vengeance shall be yours. . .**

Prince Chien is determined to claim his birthright — the Throne of a Thousand Swords — denied by his wicked aunt, Empress Mai. He has successfully turned her two equally wicked sons, Prince Minh and Prince Tuan, into dueling each other for the throne. Hiding a vial of EverBloody, Prince Chien attempts to poison their foods at the banquet. No matter who win the duel tomorrow, both wicked princes will die. One cut to the skin, and blood will flow relentless.

Prince Chien will make his aunt suffer every second in watching her beloved sons die a slow painful death. Afterward, he will take her head and the crown that sits upon it. Only then will he have successfully eliminated all the traitors who helped kill his mother and his younger sister in the palace coup thirteen years ago.

Only one person stands in his way — General Bao. Prince Chien has skirted around court intrigues, planned successful assassinations, and demurred himself as a dunce prince. But love is the one thing Prince Chien never thought he would had to face.

Whoever said that those who embark on a journey of revenge should dig two graves was not wise enough to realize love could do exactly the same thing.

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By Isabella Carter

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# *The Luxury of Vengeance*

*A Love is Always Right Story*

Isabella Carter

Once upon a time, he had dreamed of succeeding his father to the Throne of a Thousand Swords. It was his destiny, his mother had explained. Those dreams had been filled with the idyllic peace that only children could conceive. And then she had died, and Chien had been left only with his dream of the day he would finally take his aunt's head and return honor to the Throne of a Thousand Swords. Thirteen long years of planning, of arranging it so that each death would not raise suspicion. Now that the end was so close, he could scarcely believe it.

And with its being so close, he would have to be more careful than ever. There would be no worse fate than to have spent all those years in vain simply because he had grown too impatient at the end. Coming here to eavesdrop on the Empress was a stupid risk, especially since things were already falling into place, but sometimes the best way to gather information was to listen in himself.

If they found him in the tiny servant's hallway, there would be no good excuse for his presence. But he doubted she would even think to check the hallway. Few knew about it. It had been built before Chien's time as a way for servants to enter quietly and clear food from the Emperor's room. Considering the small size of the hallway, Chien didn't have to wonder too hard why that tradition had not lasted long.

The general might have found him there. He seemed to have a sense for appearing wherever Chien least wanted him. Thankfully, he had left two weeks ago, though he was due back that night. General Bao had quickly risen in Empress Mai's ranks. Chien had heard the stories of the man before he'd had the chance to meet him, a soldier who had distinguished himself on the battlefield at a young age. His superiors had taken great offence when he had been promoted so quickly.

And then he had shown quite a bit of interest in Chien. Intense stares though he seemed reluctant to actually speak to him. Chien had believed that Bao was keeping a watch on him for his aunt until one night when he had found himself cornered in his private garden while he trained. Then the general had made it clear that his interest was purely personal and Chien had seen the value in such a liaison.

Except of late he had to wonder who had control of that situation. He thought with twin feelings of annoyance and fondness of the general's goodbye a fortnight ago. The press of bodies had been nice, the pleasure almost overwhelming, but it was the aftermath that refused to leave Chien's mind. He had thrown a careless arm over Chien as if it were the most natural thing in the world and held him. After that, Chien had been hard pressed to convince himself that he still held control of this relationship, that he was only using the general and had not grown attached.

Bao had leaned over until his lips brushed Chien's ears and whispered, "Perhaps if you behave yourself, I'll bring you a present home."

Chien had been too exhausted to give much more than a huff of laughter, "Something shiny and colorful I hope." He'd nearly asked for something more. It was difficult to remember that he was supposed to play the role of the dolt prince, especially around a man who refused to treat him as such. Not for the first time he had found himself wondering what it might have been like to have a true relationship with Bao. But there was no point in wondering of things that would never be. Bao was not loyal to him. He had to keep reminding himself of that.

Rather than answer him, Bao's hand caressed a finger up his spine which made Chien squirm and pull away. His body tried valiantly to react as it always did when Bao touched him, "Please Chien, stay out of trouble."

"When am I ever in trouble?" He couldn't even get his damned body under control. He squirmed away when Bao began tracing his spine once more and rolled over to glare at him.

Bao did not seem affected by his annoyance however. His expression remained serious as he stared Chien directly in the eyes. "This is a dangerous game you're playing. Politics are not for the weak." Bao knew nothing, just enough to make a few small assumptions, but it still made him pull back further and wrap the blanket around himself as a shield.

"No, it is not." Chien agreed. Politics were not for the weak, which was why he was the only person who could wade through this and put a stop to his aunt.

Bao stared at him for a long moment, and Chien sensed that it was a test of some sort. He put the most innocent of expressions onto his face. Bao must have sensed he would not get anything further and sighed in annoyance as he pulled himself to his feet and began to dress. Chien allowed himself to enjoy the sight, the roll of tanned skin over tight muscles. It was not until Bao looked back at him that Chien realized that he had a goofy smile on his face.

While Bao secured his weapon, Chien asked lazily, "So where are you headed at any rate?"

Bao frowned at him but answered, "The Xing province."

The Xing province was in the eastern part of the kingdom and had long been a part of the empire. There was no risk of rebellion there. To his knowledge the governor of that province was focused on keeping his people as peaceful as possible in hopes that the Empress's gaze would not turn upon them. His mother had come from the Xing province. She'd once told Chien that moving to the palace had been a different experience entirely.

"Why the Xing province?"

"The Empress is searching for—Why do you want to know?" Bao stopped himself.

"Merely curious. You'll be gone for so long." Bao did not look fooled. Chien couldn't help but wonder why the Empress would send Bao to Xing? To search for something? Her favorite general? Then it occurred to him: Mai was searching for the sword of heaven.

It was written in their history that long ago, when Gods walked the earth, so too had the Dragon. His name had been lost to time, but he had grown fond of humans and their ingenuity. Before he ascended to heaven, he granted one man the insight that would allow him to bring humanity into greatness. That man had become the first Emperor and his throne the Throne of a Thousand Swords so that he might serve as the Dragon's avatar upon earth.

Since then, only the strongest were permitted to sit upon the throne, their worthiness proven by the blessing of the Dragon in the form of the Sword of Heaven. The last Chien had seen of it, his mother had taken it to the temple following his father's death. Obviously his aunt believed that his mother had hidden it near her home.

Bao leaned down and caught Chien's lips in a hard kiss. "I shall see you upon my return."

Chien knew he ought to have said no then, but he'd kept silent as always. The politics he could handle, but this swirl of feelings for Bao, the way his heart seemed to beat faster every time he saw Bao, the disappointment he felt knowing he would not see Bao for the next couple of weeks, that was something beyond him.

And frustrating. So very frustrating. He was in charge of himself. Bao's only usefulness was as a source of information.

"The Misra province?" His aunt spoke, her voice full of disgust and high enough to pull him from his memories. Misra, a small province in the south, had been among his aunt's first push after she became Empress for further control of the continent. After eight years of being ruled by a tyrant of a governor, the citizens of Misra had finally revolted against him and the Empress's rule. Since then, they had established a new system of government. Though Misra had struggled since breaking from the empire, they had managed to find trade with an island in the south. The Empire had felt the loss of Misra's bountiful fields, but thus far had not been able to spare the men to retake the province.

"Other provinces are beginning to learn from the example of the Misra province. We have heard whispers of a revolution."

"Then stop them. Do you truly need me to remind you how you should do your jobs?"

"If it were only that simple Empress." The advisor sounded pained and Chien wished there was a way he could see their faces as well as hear their voices from his hiding place. Were they frustrated with

their Empress's lack of understanding in how to handle her people? Would they stay loyal to her or to someone they thought could stop this mess. "We cannot stop multiple rebellions all at once."

"Why would they rebel? They are a part of the greatest Empire of their time."

"They cry for food, Empress. For homes to shelter their families. The waters last year washed away many homes and many have not been able to rebuild." The Empire was starving. Mai was so focused on expanding she had ignored the needs of the people and now they were suffering for it.

"The waters last year ruined many things. It is selfish of them to worry only of their own needs." If the advisor had an opinion on that thought he did not share it, "Take a contingent out to the Misra province then. Kill how many ever are necessary to bring it back under our control."

"Empress, that may be just a bit extreme—"

"There is nothing too extreme when one's reputation is at stake. Make an example of them. Other revolutions will not follow. Already we have allowed that ridiculous show of freedom go on for far too long."

"Of course Empress."

"Excellent. And now my minister of War. What objections do you bring?"

"My concerns are simple Empress." The minister's voice was cultured and polite. "If we send soldiers from the palace, it may weaken us at the palace for an attack."

"You think someone would be bold enough to invade my palace?" Mai laughed. "I would personally cut down any man stupid enough to do so." Her threat was not an idle one. Mai had been well trained by her father in the art of sword play, and Chien knew she practiced almost daily. She was certainly strong enough to hold the Throne of Swords, but there would always be that piece she lacked.

And despite what she preferred to believe, it had nothing at all to do with her gender. Women had held the throne in the past after all. It was her character that was flawed.

"Of course, my Empress. But who do you intend to lead such a force. Surely not your new general."

"You do not like General Bao?" Mai was amused.

"He is young. He does not have the experience of some of your other generals. And with the people beginning to question..." The minister paused as if not sure whether he ought to continue, "My men have heard talk that they say you are not the legitimate holder of the throne. They claim that nephew of yours in the rightful heir." Chien had heard that talk, too. He had helped to spread some of those rumors.

"They would be wrong. And any who spread such a rumor shall be killed." Mai's amusement had faded quickly to be replaced by cold steel.

"They would be comforted if they could see that you possessed the Sword of the Heavens." Centuries ago when the Golden Dragon had returned to the heavens he had left two relics behind. The first was the Throne of Swords, given to his children to prove their right to rule over the land. The second had been the Sword of the Heavens to prove his blessings upon whoever held the sword.

That was why Mai had sent Bao to the Xing province. She believed that the former Empress had hidden the sword with her family. In the thirteen years of her rule, Mai had never understood. She thought of the sword as simply a ceremonial thing, but she was quickly learning that it was so much more. If she were meant to hold it, the sword would reveal itself to her. Otherwise, like now, it would continue to allow itself to be hidden until its true carrier was revealed.

"Those commoners," Mai spat the word, "They do not have the right to set their eyes upon it! How dare they question my right to this throne? Let the man who believes himself more worthy attempt to unseat me. No, I will not display my brother's sword like some gaudy treasure."

"Yes but—"

"You wonder why General Bao was promoted so quickly. He learned at a young age not to question his superiors. Perhaps you should take from his example." Even hearing her speak his name

made Chien's stomach roil in rage. She did not have the right to speak it. He stopped himself before the rage could go too far. This was not the best way to deal with his idiotic infatuation with the one man who could easily bring him to ruin.

"Of course, Empress." The minister sounded appropriately cowed. "There is the matter of the soldiers as well."

"The soldiers?"

The minister sighed, "Your son has taken to challenging them of late."

"That is the sort of things men do, Minister."

"He has killed quite a few of them as well." Tuan's temper would destroy the Empire's army long before any enemy.

"Then they obviously lacked the skill to perform their duties. Would you have me reprimand my son for weeding out the weak?"

"Of course not." Chien wondered how Mai could not hear the frustration in her minister's voice. "There is also the matter of your heir."

"I have tried to get them to call off that stupid duel." Worry seeped into her voice. Mai may have been a number of things, but nothing mattered more than her sons. She could not protect them from their own stupidity, however. All it had taken to set them against one another had been a few innocent questions and sly insinuations. Child's play.

"It may not be a bad thing, Empress." The minister's tone was tentative. "I know you were reluctant to set them against one another, but it would do some good to see that the future of the throne has been secured."

"Not at the expense of my children's lives!"

"Of course, Empress. But there is no stopping it now. The princes are quite stubborn." Not to mention both of them were convinced that they would defeat the other with ease. Minh was so taken with his brilliance and Tuan with his strength that they were blind to any reasoning their mother attempted.

"They are." Her tone was fond. "They're very much like their father that way. But you are right, I cannot stop them, only pray that they both return to me when it is done." That prayer would not be answered, not if Chien's plan went as intended. Mai's sons were as bad as she herself was, vicious men who believed that anything they wanted should be theirs. Many a maid had gone missing while in employ at the palace. Chien would feel no guilt at their end.

He stood carefully, no longer interested in the conversation. He had the information he wanted. His aunt could not keep control and soon, when she could not produce the Sword of Heaven, the people would lose further faith in her. If he was willing to wait, her reign would fall apart on its own. These small revolutions were proof enough of that.

Chien could not wait that long however. Anticipation made his hands shake. So close. He could not wait any longer. There would be no more of pretending the fool. No more watching his aunt destroy his empire, kill his people. There would at last be an end to this story and his father's throne would finally be his.

Chien had to crawl free carefully, thankful that he had not dared to wear one of his more elaborate robes, but a training robe instead. He might have cried to see rips in his favorite silk. Once he had managed to pull himself free, he paused for a moment to ensure that no one had heard him. It would not do to find himself caught running from the Empress's room like a guilty servant.

The dust shook free from his blonde hair after a quick run through with his fingers and he hoped he looked inconspicuous enough to make it back to his rooms without pulling anyone's attention. With one last glance around, Chien slipped from the Empress's war room, down the hallway and down the steps to the light wind and steady sun of the outside. Spring was fading quickly into summer, the flowers of the Phoenix Tail tree just beginning to bloom. Chien paused for a moment to admire them. There was

one tree for each of the emperors who had reigned over the empire. Each of these trees was a lasting legacy of the wisdom of the men who had ruled.

If Chien needed anything right now, it was wisdom. He wandered closer, his hand brushing against the rough bark of the trunk. None of the trees were marked, but Chien found that if he listened closely enough, he could feel them. He stopped first in front of his grandfather's tree. The trunk was sturdy, the branches short. His grandfather's time had been one of stability and little growth. He had died when Chien had been very young, but Chien could remember him still as a very steady and calm man. He had died peacefully in his sleep.

In comparison, his father's tree was struggling to survive. He had not understood it when he had been younger, but his father had always been sickly. For the longest time, they had believed that his older sister would take her father's place. But then their father had declared his youngest son his heir instead. Chien had always wondered if his grandfather had sensed something inside of her. The space beside his father's tree was empty. Mai had not yet proven herself. She could not plant her own tree yet.

The heavy hand that settled upon his shoulder startled him and he turned, prepared for any manner of things, his hand going automatically to the place his sword should have been. Minh stood behind him, a curious look on his face, "Cousin? How lucky!" His nose curled, "But why are you so filthy? And why are you in this," he paused, looking around the grove of trees before shivering slightly, "ghastly place."

Ghastly. His cousin had no appreciation for the sacred grove. The Empire would be lost if one of them ascended to the throne. "I got lost." And there had been the voice. Whatever presence had been here a short time ago had vanished into the wind once more. The false Empress? Someone else who wished to rise against her?

Minh frowned at his statement. "Well, it's no matter. I need a moment to speak with you. Outside of here." There seemed to be something about the grove that truly disturbed him. He stepped outside of the edge of the grove and gestured Chien closer.

With a sigh, Chien stepped outside of the grove as well before answering, "If you might give me a moment to make myself more appropriate then." They both looked down at Chien's drab attire. Dust clung to the sleeves and Chien prayed Minh would not ask.

"No, no time. Time is wasting cousin." He pulled on Chien's arm until Chien relented with a sweet smile. In his mind though he could not figure what Minh might need him for. For the most part, his cousins preferred to ignore his existence until it was useful to them. Which meant Minh wanted something.

"How might I help you cousin?" The faster he could get it out of Minh, the faster he could return to his rooms to continue his plotting in peace.

"In a moment. I wish to speak with you about something." The closer they grew to Minh's rooms the more worried Chien grew. He could defend himself, Minh was hardly a martial genius after all, but this would certainly accelerate his plans if Minh decided to try something and take him out of any chance of succeeding the Empress. "Have you eaten your first meal?"

Not that Chien had a chance of succeeding the Empress without drastic measures. She had done everything she could to destroy his chances to his throne, including spreading rumors that he was not his father's legitimate child, but the child of a palace guard whom scarcely anyone could remember.

"I have not." Minh pulled him into his private rooms and gave the servants quick orders. When one, a young woman, gave him a baffled look, he shouted his directions once more. She looked around, frightened, until Chien subtly tilted his head toward the door and she ran gratefully toward it.

"I swear the servants grow stupider each day."

In truth, since the Empress had begun stretching her territory, the Empire contained a number of provinces that did not speak the palace's tongue. "I suppose."

"Sit. Sit." Chien sat at the table, making his movements clumsy and nervous while his mind tried to dissect all possible reasons Minh would need his assistance. "Sit Chien!" Minh ordered when Chien took too long getting settled.

"I'm sorry cousin."

"No, no, it's fine. I've likely made you nervous." He seemed proud of himself as he cleared his throat. "You see, I need your help."

"Why would you need my help, Cousin? You're quite smart." Minh prided his intellect above everything. His mother had ensured that he was raised by only the best of tutors, sending any she found subpar to death. When it became clear that he had surpassed the teachers, she had given him the task of spreading education to all the provinces.

Minh had quickly found that he was far better suited for lording his knowledge over others than organizing any others into a cohesive plan. Within a year, the plans for a system of education had quickly fallen through in favor of Minh's forming a small class within the palace to teach only those who carried his favor first.

As always, Minh fell victim to a bit of flattery. "Why yes, of course. But even a smart man knows when to accept help. And you will help me won't you?"

Chien nodded eagerly.

"Excellent! I'm sure you have heard of my duel with Tuan."

"I have." Chien was beginning to form a suspicion of what this was truly about. Could Mai's son really have so little honor left? "Tuan does not think you will come out the victor."

"Yes well, he is sorely mistaken. But this is where I need your help cousin. I have heard rumors that Tuan is attempting to circumvent the honorable restrictions of our duel."

"That's terrible! We could go and speak to the Empress together!"

"Oh no, I cannot do that. I cannot take control of this empire with anything less than the people's complete faith in my abilities. We must beat him at his own game."

Minh sounded so very proud of himself, and Chien wanted to sigh because he had already figured the point of this exercise. "How might we do that cousin?"

Minh began to answer him, but the door slid open and their breakfast was served. The food was warm and fragrant, and Chien's stomach reminded him of how long he had been awake without eating. When all the bowls had been set out, Minh dismissed them with a nod of his head and began to eat. His eating was a sign that Chien could begin as well. There would come a day when Chien would not be lower in rank than anybody. Then he would be able to eat his damned food as he pleased.

"Now, cousin, the best way to deal with my dear brother I think would be with a little extract from this plant I have grown quite familiar with."

"Poison?" Minh wanted him to poison Tuan so that he could get rid of his brother and blame someone else for the catastrophe at the same time. It was a cold blooded and calculated move. A move worthy of his mother.

"Not poison. I hardly want to see my brother dead." The way he stated that made it hard for Chien to believe. "It will just paralyze him a bit. He'll fall over, I'll win, and we're all happier."

"But won't he know?"

Minh waved the question aside as he picked up another of the bowls, "I love my dear brother, but Tuan is not exactly bright. He would have the empire constantly at war over nothing." And wasn't that the truth. Though Chien pondered if Minh would be much better. Hardly. Men who thought themselves great leaders rarely were in practice. "What this Empire truly needs is something willing to bring the provinces together. I have plans my dear cousin. Education, industry. Plans that would never see fruition under Tuan's rule."

"Industry?"

"Have you not heard? They have begun to see the most interesting applications of science in the territories outside of the empire. Imagine our strength if we could bring those devices to the empire. Our enemies would cower before us." Chien had heard tales of the war machines developed outside of the Empire. Heard tales of the devastation they had wrought. And Minh hoped to bring those vicious machines to the Empire? "It would prove an effective way to secure my dominance over the distant territories and stop these ridiculous revolutions." As if sensing that he had lost Chien somewhere along the way, he added, "And if he were to take rule, I'm sure he would make life very hard for you."

Chien frowned, "It is true. Tuan does not care for me as you do, Cousin, but I do not wish to make the Empress angry."

"She will not be angry. She will never know. That is the best part!"

"She'll never know?"

"Of course not. I'll never tell her and you won't either. It'll be our secret."

"I do wish to help you, Cousin." Chien stated reluctantly. "And if it shall be a secret."

"Excellent." Minh stood and walked to his chest, reaching deep inside of it to retrieve a box.

"Just pour this into his drink tonight just after Mother begins her speech and everything shall be taken care of."

"A few drops?"

"The whole thing." Chien glanced upward while he spoke and saw the disturbingly cheerful grin that crossed his cousin's face. He recognized the smell of this particular vial. This was not about disabling Tuan in the least. Minh hoped to kill his brother in an exceedingly painful manner.

"And this will help?" At the very least, Minh would get what he wanted in the end. But he would suffer the very same fate of course.

"Of course it will."

"And I will not get into trouble?"

"Chien, don't ask so many questions." Minh was irritated by his doubt and doing a poor job of hiding it. "It will work out perfectly. Now enjoy your breakfast, I have things to take care of." Minh ate the last of what was left in his bowl and left. Chien did not miss the fact that two guards stepped inside at his absence.

Chien had to force the last of the food down for form's sake before asking shyly for an escort back to his room. Once he was alone, he looked back into the box. A vial of translucent green liquid sat inside of it. Minh wanted him to poison Tuan.

His method lacked honor as well, but Tuan and Minh were not his true targets for the throne. They would need to be dealt with of course. They were as wicked as their mother. Wicked for the mere fact that they had had so much more time to grow into monsters beyond what their mother had become.

The worst part about his aunt's betrayal was that she had not always been as such. Once upon a time, his aunt had treated Chien and his sister, An like her own. She had been full of laughter and stories. The death of her husband had changed her.

The same way the death of his family had changed him.

The banquet that night would see the last part of his plans to fall into place. He could only hope the Dragon would protect him.

Chien watched from the verandah as the sun sank into the ground and day slid seamlessly into night. The banquet would come soon; Chien was not at all completely sure he was ready. His mind whirled with worries and doubts, and no matter how much he attempted to tell himself that he should throw them away, the action was far more difficult than the thought.

His personal guards sat before him, their backs to the wall. Chien had always assumed that the Empress had placed him there in hopes that some lucky assassin would take the bait she had so lovingly

placed and do away with him. There had been no assassins, however. General Bao, despite the minister's doubt of him, took his job quite seriously.

It was how Chien had met him, patrolling along the path that led from Chien's rooms to the main hall, his dark eyes not missing a single thing. Especially not the sight of a prince busy training when all should have been asleep.

Thinking on it, he could nearly recall the sound of Bao's boots against the stone path. He was being stupid allowing himself to become distracted like that. He should have been meditating in hopes that the Dragon would help him calm his mind and find the answers. Instead he was letting his thoughts once again bring him down the dusty forbidden path.

After a few seconds though, he realized that the sound of boots upon gravel was not simply in his imagination. His eyes opened and he took in the sight of Bao, that damnable half smirk upon his face, steadily approaching him.

The man seemed so damned confident in his reception that Chien grew more determined to sit right where he was and allow Bao to come to him. If anything, Bao's smirk widened. Could he hear Chen's heart pounding even now? "Prince Chien," Bao greeted him with a bow once he drew close enough.

"General. Have you paid visits to my cousins in such a manner as well?"

Bao laughed and stood, "I would have, but I believe I made a promise of a particularly spoiled prince."

"You forget your place, General."

"I much prefer you like this." Chien's eyes widened in confusion. "In front of the Empress and the princes, you play the fool. But here in the rising dark you are filled with haughty pride. It suits you." Bao stood close enough now that he caught Chien's chin in his calloused hand.

"Is that so, General?" But Chien could not think of any witty response, not when this man's presence seemed enough to cloud his thoughts until he could not remember a whit of his master plan. All he could think of was the tragedy that would inevitably unfold when Bao broke his heart. At that thought, he yanked backward and stood to his feet, "I would prefer to continue this conversation inside."

"Of course." Bao followed him peaceably inside, shutting the door behind him and securing it before turning back to Chien.

Chien had taken care to ensure that everything had been hidden. The Everbloody sat safely in his chest, hidden amongst the silks of his robes. The poison that Minh had sent hid in an elaborate thin box beside his bed. Unlike his cousin, his room was simple. He could not decorate it in the manner he preferred: In the bold colors that had characterized his mother's homeland or the black and gold that had characterized his father's reign. So instead he had chosen an austere look. Nothing to distract him, nothing to do in his room except focus.

Bao looked around for a moment, a frown on his face before his eyes settled onto Chien. He began to take off his sword when Chien interrupted him, "Is that necessary? I had assumed your business would be quick."

Rather than being put off by Chien's sharp tone, Bao seemed merely amused. He stared Chien in the eye and purposefully unhooked his sword from his belt and sat it to the side. "Perhaps we could sit and talk, Prince."

"Why bother calling me by my title if you have no intention of respecting my position?" Chien sat beside the table as Bao instructed.

"Because it suits you in these moods." He set the long box he had been carrying onto the table. "You showed interest in my journey before. I thought you might want to hear of it."

Chien was curious. He had not been allowed beyond these walls in years. Not that he had not made his way to the village just outside the palace's walls from time to time. But that could only be done so often without raising suspicions. "Did you find what the Empress searched for?"

"Not at all," Bao frowned, "It appears that whatever source she had heard was incorrect."

"I wonder what she searches for."

Bao gave him a look, "Sometimes I wonder just how much of you is the role you play and how much is the real prince."

"Is that so? Have you found the answer then?"

"Not quite. But if I never find the answer, it will not be for lack of persistence."

Chien could not help himself from snorting in laughter, "Do let me know then, General, when you find the solution."

"Do you know the story of the Sword of Heavens?"

"It was granted to the first Emperor by the Dragon. It is the history of my family. Of course I would be aware." Chien answered when Bao seemed surprised.

"When the governor asked you last month you claimed to have not a clue."

"The governor prefers to pretend that he knows all things. It is easier to amuse him than fight it."

For the first time since Chien had known him, Bao seemed a bit unsure of himself. "Do you do that with all people then? Humor them in hopes that they will give you a moment's peace?"

Here was his moment. The moment he could sever this relationship with one easy blow. He did not need Bao's information any more, did he? Not with things so close. But the same part of him that so easily allowed him to do away with his evil aunt and her wicked sons would not allow him to lie to Bao in this moment. "Sometimes. And sometimes I find that the truth slips free beyond my control. It unsettles me."

There was a long pause while Bao searched his eyes, and Chien could not help but wonder what Bao searched for. At last though, he looked down to the box beneath his fingers. "I brought you a present."

He handed the box to Chien and Chien accepted it tentatively. "A present? General, you did not have to."

"Did you behave yourself?"

"Hardly."

Bao laughed and Chien found himself smiling as well, "I would hardly expect anything more of you. But since I have already made a purchase of this, you might as well take it."

Curious now, Chien pulled it close and slowly removed the top of the box. Within the box lay a purple silk robe, soft and luxurious to the touch. A design had been embroidered along the sleeves, the threads catching the lights of the dying sun. Chien ran his fingers along it and he could scarcely feel the embroidery. The sleeves were gold, embroidered with a fine black thread. There were no appropriate words. This was not a gift that Bao could have commissioned in a period of two weeks. Something of this quality would have taken months to make.

His hand ran once more along the threads and he could feel the tingle along his fingers. There were spells woven within this robe. Ancient spells of protection. When his hands slipped free of the robe he could feel that there was more beneath of it. The black coat with the dark green of the dragon weaved in so subtly that Chien nearly missed it.

He could not speak. Were there words for something such as this? He owned finer things to be sure, but nothing would ever mean quite as much as the robe in his hands. When he did not say anything for a long while, Bao finally asked, "Do you like it?"

Like? That was hardly an appropriate word. This was not the gift of a man seeking simply to settle his urges. It was a gift of a man who had seen uncomfortably close behind the mask Chien preferred. When had he slipped this badly? How had Bao seen this much?

It took a few minutes longer for him to find words. He managed a choked, "Thank you." How long had he wished that he had managed to save one of his mother's robes. These silken robes were not the fashion of the palace. His mother had brought hers with her from Xing and his aunt had burned them all when she had taken the throne.

"You like them, I'm glad." Bao sounded relieved.

"They're quite beautiful."

"Yes well, the Empress will likely not approve of them. But the colors and the style seemed to suit you." Chien made the mistake of looking up into Bao's eyes. This situation had spiraled out of his control. This relationship had gone too far. Too long. The thought of seeing hate in those eyes, filled Chien with fear.

There had to be a way to end this with everything intact.

Life is suffering. Chien's fist clenched around the beautiful fabric at the reminder. There would be no happy ending for him, not in this, likely not ever. Because there was no ending in which his aunt died and Bao did not turn on him. No ending where his aunt lived and he could live with himself.

Better to break this now, protect himself before he fell any further. Yet even as the thought crossed his mind, when Bao leaned toward him, he moved closer until their lips touched. "Thank you." Chien whispered once more against Bao's lips when the kiss broke.

This would end badly. With either his sword through Bao's heart or Bao's sword through his. Even knowing that, Chien could not stop himself from greedily taking another kiss. Better to enjoy than to regret his control later.

"I should go. I need to speak with the Empress before the banquet." But Bao did not move immediately, leaning his forehead against Chien's and kissing him once more before pulling back and standing in one easy motion.

"General." Bao stopped in the act of securing his weapon once more, "Thank you."

Bao smiled at him, the expression uncommonly soft and sweet, before he turned and opened the door. The maid standing on the other side of the door jumped and stammered in a foreign language. Bao merely nodded at her before continuing on his way. Once he had moved, Chien could see that it was the same maid Minh had scolded earlier. While she stared after Bao, he quickly sealed the box and set it aside. When he had time later, he would set it into his hiding place in hopes that no one would find it.

By the time she turned around, the robe was safely out of sight. She looked about to say something, but a sound outside the door made her jump and she hurried instead to begin preparing the robe his aunt expected him to wear that night. Chien spared a moment of curiosity for what she might have said, but then his attention was torn once more between Bao and his plan.

After twenty minutes of bustling around, the woman turned and looked like she might speak once more. Whatever the problem, she seemed to think better of it. Instead, she bowed and left as quietly as she had arrived. Curious once more, Chien dressed quickly before taking advantage of the time alone to move to his hiding spot, the board he had pried loose years ago to hide his secrets beneath. Bao's gift went inside. Chien could not resist stroking his fingers against it once more before reaching further into the hole and pulling free a pouch.

Everbloody was a highly illegal substance. The base ingredients were found in the base of the mountains in the north, a perilous journey. Any shaman who dared to create the substance risked death, as some of the components were known to release a deadly air if combined incorrectly. The shaman who had sold him the vial had carried burn marks all over his arms, and Chien had seen a hint of the burn across his face. Some called it devils magic. Everbloody rendered the body incapable of

stopping the flow of blood. The blood would continue to flow until there was none left. It was messy. It was painful. It was for making a point.

The sharp knock on the door made Chien jump, and he quickly secured his hiding place and hid the vial within his sleeve before the men entered, their faces impassable. Right now, they saw him as nothing more than an annoyance. His aunt's rather idiotic nephew. He wondered how many of them would turn on him if they knew the truth. How many would support him?

The banquet hall was nearly full by the time he entered. He made his bows to his aunt and she gave a small laugh, "You are quite late dear nephew."

"I apologize, Empress."

"It is no matter. Tonight is a night of relaxation, not one for apologies." Chien took his seat, one tier beneath his cousins as she continued, "Even in such sad times we must find time to relax and enjoy the small things. The revolution is nearly at an end, so my minister informs me."

Around them, the men attending the banquet muttered amongst themselves. Mai would only invite those she considered loyal to her, and they had long since learned the price of speaking against her, even if they did not believe her.

"Is your wine not to your taste, cousin?" Chien tore himself from his thoughts to focus on Minh. He wore the same gold as his mother, his superior smirk making Chien impatient to see the end of this all. When Minh would lie on the ground dying with the realization that he was not at all the smartest man. That he had been beaten.

Chien swallowed his feelings and gave Minh a vague smile, "I must admit, I've been unsettled since you told me of your plans. I worry the general may suspect."

"I had wondered why he paid you a visit." So Minh had known. Hardly surprising. He studied Chien with a critical eye, "He would not suspect you. He is far too distracted by his interest in you."

"Interest?" Perhaps Minh was more perceptive than he had given him credit for.

Minh shook his head. "Nevermind. You should not worry, cousin. No one will discover why Tuan has fallen. They will simply believe he has overworked himself." And even if they did discover the reason, Minh had arranged it so that Chien would be blamed instead. "You did bring what I asked, correct?" Only a simpleton would have been fooled by such a foolish plan.

"Of course." Chien's fingers brushed against the vial hidden within his sleeve. A reminder that no matter what part he played, he was still in control. There were days he feared he might find that he had lost himself completely. That in all the years leading to this moment, he might have forgotten why he fought. His biggest fear was that one day he might find forgiveness. That he might leave all the wrong his aunt had done unchallenged and learn to live with the loneliness his aunt had inflicted upon him.

"Then it will be simple. Wait until after the Empress has finished her welcome then offer him a glass for good luck tomorrow."

"Do you think he would accept such a thing from me?" Of course he would. Everyone believed Chien was dangerous only to himself.

"You will have to convince him, cousin. I believe in you." Smug pig. Chien turned his attention back to the mass of tables a few steps below them. The Empress had invited the highest ranking of her council and the ministries to celebrate this night.

As his eyes wandered the crowd, he caught sight of a shadow in the corner to the left of the Empress. No matter how much he tried to sink into the shadow, Bao would never be the type to face away. There was something about his manner that refused to be ignored or passed over.

The moment their eyes met, Bao's mouth quirked in a knowing grin. Irritated, Chien glared at him before turning his eyes purposefully forward. Yet another area where he feared he was losing control. He was thankfully distracted by the loud whispers of two women sitting at the table closest to him.

"If the two princes are fighting for the right to inherit, shouldn't Prince Chien take part as well?"

"Could you imagine him ruling the empire?" The second woman laughed, "The Throne of Swords recognizes strength, not stupidity. The best Prince Chien could ever hope to do is marry advantageously. If he gets a pretty enough wife, everyone will forget how empty his head is." She laughed at her own joke.

"But he should be fighting," the first woman continued to insist, "If it's to be fair and all. He is of the blood."

"I hear tale that he is not even his father's son. That his aunt did his mother a favor by taking him in."

"You think she had an affair?"

"She's from the eastern province, after all."

Chien turned then and the women seemed to realize that they had been overheard. The one on the left with her painted face and brightly colored robes was not the one who had spoken poorly of his mother. That belonged to the older one. She had not bothered with makeup which meant she was likely married to one of his aunt's court. He thought he recognized her. She was dressed fully in black, a widow then. In fact, looking at her, Chien was almost sure that her husband had been number eleven on his list.

She stared at him dismissively before registering that there was something different about him this time. Something not at all like the dunce prince she was accustomed to. Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment and she inclined her head toward him. "The next time you speak ill of my mother will be the last you speak at all." His voice was low enough that his threat didn't carry much further than her and her friend and she gasped.

Fear lit in her eyes and she squirmed on her seating pillow, clearly wishing she could be as far from him as possible, but held by social dictates.

The room fell silent as the Empress began her welcome speech. Chien did not need to focus on her words.

It did not matter what she said now. By this time tomorrow, she would be dead. He would not hide in the night like she had but face her head on. Everything she had, everything she valued, would be destroyed. In that moment before her death she would understand what it felt like to be completely alone. And in that moment, he would know true success.

He played with the silk of his sleeve as he thought, running his fingers along it. With the Empress dead he would have success at last, but then would come the hardest part. Then he would have to see if the empire would follow his lead. His aunt had taken control of an army; Chien had but his sword and the right of his blood behind him.

"Cousin!" Minh once again pulled him from his thoughts, and Chien turned to him, his confusion working in his favor. Minh looked around before pointing to his cup.

Chien had barely turned forward before one of the servants delivered a full glass of wine with a sweet smile. Once she had turned to deliver elsewhere, Chien lifted his hand and uncorked the vial. The shaman had said that a few drops would do, but nearly half of the vial had spilled before he stopped it and slipped the vial back into his sleeve. He didn't have to turn to feel Minh's approving smile.

There was another stare on him, however, one with enough intensity to make him feel completely exposed. No one met his eyes though when he made a quick sweep of the lower tables. To his right, Tuan was fully and completely occupied by his food. A glance up to the upper platform reserved for the Empress showed that she was deep in discussion.

He was being paranoid. The one failing of treason was the fear that everyone was looking for you. Chien stood gracefully to his feet and walked to Tuan's table. Tuan barely acknowledged his presence as he knelt to sit beside him. "Cousin."

Tuan turned to face him at last, cold indifference upon his face. Unlike his brother, he had never seen the purpose in learning to deal with people. His strength had always scared off those who his position had not managed to. "Go back to your seat, Chien." He growled. Chien knew his mother had ordered them to present a polite image in front of others. Chien had his supporters as well and the belief that the son of the former emperor supported the current Empress kept more rebellions at bay.

"I have brought you a drink. A wish of good luck for your battle tomorrow."

Tuan looked sullenly at Minh surrounded by courtiers. "I thought you were in league with my brother."

"Minh is far too smug. His pride will lead him to a swift defeat."

"Does he still believe he can defeat me?" Tuan scoffed.

"He has spoken of nothing but," Chien replied. "He believes you are so slow witted that you will not wake in time for your duel."

"That fool." Tuan slammed his hand into his table and the wood cracked.

"I do not believe such things, however." It was pathetic to see how Tuan's eyes lit with hope. "I much prefer to side with strength."

Tuan took the cup from his hand and stared at it for a long moment. "Why is that, cousin?"

"When the dragon ascended he mandated that the Throne of a Thousand Swords serve as his claw, delivering justice in his name. The man who sits upon that throne must be strong. Minh is a coward."

"That he is." Tuan gave him a half smile then threw the drink back with a gulp. "I will show you tomorrow cousin. You have chosen well."

Chien bowed his head in recognition and stood. "I shall leave you to your meal cousin."

Tuan did not answer, his attention returned to the bowl that had been set in front of him. Chien returned to his seat. When Minh gave him a questioning look, Chien nodded subtly. Now that one had been taken care of, he would have to deal with the other. Only by taking care of the both of them would the first phase of his revenge against his aunt be complete.

When the courtiers that had surrounded Minh thinned, Chien stood once more, taking one last drink of his own cup before he travelled to his cousin's table and knelt beside it. "Chien!" Minh scolded, "You should not be here so openly!"

"I apologize, cousin. It was simply," he paused and shook his head, "No, perhaps you are right. Tuan's words a moment ago confused me, but you must be right." He made to stand, setting his hand down on the table to steady him.

Minh's hand slammed over his own just as he had predicted. "No, the mistake has been made. Now what did my brother say to you."

"That it was just as well that I side with him since you have no chance of victory in your duel."

Minh tried to laugh it away, but the sound came out bitter, "No chance? The fool. He will certainly see his error in the morning won't he?"

"I think so too, but what if he does—"

"He will not win this duel!" Minh interrupted sharply. Chien jumped at his sudden volume and the table shook, Minh's glass tipping over.

"Chien! You fool!" Servants swarmed in to assist them in cleaning up the mess and a new glass was quickly brought. In the ensuing chaos, Chien got his hand over the opening of the glass.

Someone grabbed him hard by his arm and the vial slipped from his fingers. There was a surge of panic, of fear, before he watched it roll neatly under the table. Only then did he look up at his captor. Bao did not appear amused. "Your Empress, it appears the prince has overindulged. If you would permit me to escort him to his room?"

Mai seemed both annoyed and grateful, "If you would please, General." Her expression made it clear that Chien would face the brunt of her anger in the morning when she was not surrounded by

courtiers. "I do hope you will reflect upon your behavior in the morning nephew. It shames me to see you like this."

Chien wanted to challenge her right then, but there was a proper time for all things. He nodded and bowed his head in shame, "I apologize for my behavior, Empress."

Her expression was inscrutable. "Rest well nephew."

Bao did not give him the dignity of walking from the hall, but instead half dragged him behind him. Chien allowed it until they stepped out onto the verandah walkway into the sultry night air. Once they were away from prying eyes, Chien pulled away and Bao allowed it.

"Thank you for your assistance, General, but I can handle myself from here."

"Perhaps you could explain to me what I may have seen you pour into the prince's drink."

Chien froze. "Pardon?"

"When you knocked his cup over, you spilled something into his drink." Bao's eyes narrowed as Chien turned to face him, "I saw it."

He should have been watching more carefully. Hadn't he felt the general's eyes on him? Hadn't he recognized that intense gaze? He wanted to curse his stupidity, but he did not dare give any more away. Lie. It would just take another lie. He was good at those was he not? His greatest skill since his mother's death. "I would not dare drop something into the prince's drink." His eyes widened in innocence, a move that had fooled not only his dimwitted cousins but his aunt as well at one time or another.

"Do not play me for fool, Prince Chien." Dangerous. He had let his guard fall, let himself grow too close to Bao, and now his plan would be ruined by his own foolishness. What had he thought to himself only a few hours ago? He was too close to make such mistakes.

"Play you for fool, General, who would do such a thing?" Chien paused beside the pond and crouched to watch the goldfish play, trying to give himself a chance to pull himself and his story together.

"Why do you do this, Chien?" Bao sounded exasperated. Good. At least he was not alone in it for once. "Why do you play the easily distracted dunce?"

"Easily distracted?" Chien watched as the goldfish darted within the pool, lazy splotches of color. "You do not think a pond is suitable for my attentions?"

"They're goldfish."

"Maybe." He could not continue to engage in this conversation, not when there was a risk that he would give away more. Bao was surprisingly astute, and Chien could feel his control over this situation slipping from his fingers more and more as he stood, "If you are quite finished—"

"I'm not."

In his head, Chien cursed. "I have no interest in answering your accusations."

"I could bring them before the Empress instead."

Chien paused then slowly turned to face Bao. It was not worth it to feel betrayed. Not worth it to examine that pain in his chest. "You may feel free to report to the Empress anything you like." He'd known this. Gone into this situation with his eyes wide open. Bao's loyalties would always lie with the Empress first. This was why he'd tried so hard to remind himself not to get too close.

When you allowed people close, their inevitable betrayal only hurt so much more. And in the palace, betrayal was inevitable.

Bao was yet one more thing it seemed she'd stolen from him before he'd ever had a chance to truly appreciate it.

"Chien, if you could simply explain it to me I could—"

"And do not refer to me so familiarly." Distance. Distance was important. Because there was only one thing that mattered, really.

He watched his words take effect on Bao, his face became colder, his mouth set in a hard line. Had Chien truly done that to him? The lives he'd taken in the search for vengeance and here was the one battle he regretted winning. "Of course, Prince."

Chien did not have much to say in answer to that, instead turning to walk toward his rooms on the far side of the palace. Bao fell into quiet step behind him.

It had not been his fault, he rationalized. Bao had been the one to bring up the Empress's name. To believe that invoking her name would somehow spill all of Chien's secrets.

"There was a time when you might have told me you loved me." The words sounded unspeakably intimate.

"Words that lovers whisper in the dark of night," Chien whispered back, "fade like shadows in the day."

Bao cursed and grabbed hold once more of Chien's arm to pull him around. Chien's mouth opened to make it clear how little he appreciated being yanked around as such but the intensity of Bao's gaze took his words away. Not for the first time, Chien wondered what Bao saw when he looked at him. Was he the dunce prince he pretended to be? Did Bao see him as the capable man he wanted to be? Or was it some terrifying between? Had he somehow managed to delve beneath everything Chien pretended to be and broke through to the truth beneath.

The truth was that he had never been fooled really, not completely. Not enough for Chien's comfort. It would have been smarter to be done with it now. To kill him and ensure that no one knew of his plan. He was so close, he could surely do that couldn't he? Bao stood so close. It would have been so easy to grab his weapon and be done with him at last.

He was weak, hardly deserving of the throne himself. His father would have done whatever was necessary. His mother would not have allowed anything to stand in her way. And as their child sworn to uphold their honor, he could not do the simple task of stopping this man before he brought years of planning down around Chien's head. Bao had asked to help him. The damn man would prove the beginning of his end.

"Do not feed me proverbs." Chien far preferred him like this. Eyes flashing and cheeks mottled red with anger. "Do not lie to me." Words that lovers whispered. Chien had meant every one of them each and every time he had spoken it and still it had not done him a bit of good. He'd chosen a man he could not keep. When Bao kissed him, he did not bother to pretend he did not want exactly that. His hands pulled free from Bao's grip to sink into the dark silk of his hair. He could feel Bao's finding their way beneath the layers of his robe.

Chien pulled back before Bao could find skin. Before his clever tongue and cleverer hands made Chien forget why this could not be allowed. Bao leaned in for another kiss and Chien avoided him. Finally their foreheads rest together. "How can I protect you when you will not tell me the truth?"

"I have never needed you to protect me." Bao was sworn to protect one. The woman Chien was sworn to kill. "Good night, General." And even then he did not move right away. It took for the sound of someone approaching for him to release Bao and walk quickly toward his rooms.

Somewhere in the part of his mind that wanted nothing more than to see all of this end well, was the part that wanted desperately to believe that the Dragon would accept him as heir to the throne. He hated the darkness, the darkness made it far too easy to see the very space where his plans would fall apart. The soldiers would not sit aside and watch while their Empress died. The governors would refuse to pledge their allegiance to a man who was known as nothing more than the Empress's fool. All of his work would prove meaningless when the deception he had used for so long to survive turned against him.

It made it easier for him to step through the thin door and release the servants from their duty that night. Gave him time to close the door behind them with a long relieved sigh as he stretched his

body and rolled his sore muscles. It was hard work pretending to be someone else. Chien felt the deception sitting upon him each day, almost a physical burden.

The end. The words circled in his head. If Bao kept his silence—and Chien had extracted no such promise from him—but if he kept his silence tomorrow could be the end. Tomorrow would be the end regardless. Either he would join his family in death, or he would finally take his father's throne. There was no middle ground. No acceptance. No forgiveness. No help.

In that moment, he would stand completely alone.

And not for the first time in the last couple of months, he wondered if that was truly what he wished.

His eyes slipped closed as his mind swirled with more questions than answers. Before he knew it, sleep overtook him.

He awoke to the blurry sight of someone leaning over him. For a moment, the fear overtook him. This was far too much like that night. Any moment now he would see the gleam of the sword meant to take his life. Then his vision cleared and he could see Bao above him.

"General?"

Bao shushed him as he rolled to lay beside him. He wore neither armor nor sword so it was clear that he had not come to drag Chien out to his execution. His dark hair was bound in a loose braid, his eyes searching Chien's face. "Do you not trust me Chien?"

Chien's mouth opened to chastise him once again for the familiarity of his tone, but he found himself instead answering, "It is ridiculous to think that I should trust every man who warms my bed."

"You have many men who do so, do you?" Bao's eyes narrowed.

"That is not what I meant." Chien kicked at him and Bao released him so that he could sit up. Lying down seemed too vulnerable. "You come each night and leave before the light of dawn. There are no feelings involved in this. So why should I trust you?"

"You truly believe that there are no feelings involved?"

If he lied enough, he could convince himself it was the truth. "You can only be loyal to one, General."

"Do not call me that. Not now."

"One of us must remember our place."

"I could remind you of your place." Bao's voice was a silky warning and Chien moved purposefully to the edge of the bed. "You use your title as a shield, but not tonight. I wish to know the truth."

"The truth?"

"I do not like being kept in the dark."

Chien could not help but laugh, "Then prepare to live in disappointment, General." Chien scooted a bit further away at the very real threat in Bao's eyes. "You do not always get what you want." If you could, Chien would have his throne and this frustrating man.

"Perhaps not." Bao conceded, "But I will have an explanation on why my loyalty to the Empress affects what happens between the two of us."

"How can you stay loyal to her?" Bao was annoyed by his question, "Surely you must see the person she is. She will see this Empire run into the ground. Millions starving while she throws lavish banquets and plots her wars."

"She is our Empress. No matter how much I may disagree, it would be treason to doubt her."

"So you will kill innocents in her name?"

"Chien, where I was raised, we had nothing but the Dragon to sustain us. If we do not have faith, then we have nothing at all. The Dragon placed her upon that throne for a reason. So I shall serve to the best of my ability. And you should do the same." His eyes did not match his words, however. Chien wondered for how long his faith had been tested. How much had he lost in his duty to the Empress? It

was stupid to want to protect him. Bao could protect himself after all. But he wanted to pull the wool from Bao's eyes. Wanted to force him to see the truth.

"You cannot be this blind. How long do you believe the Empress will allow me to live? Tomorrow, she will have secured an heir for her throne. She is not preparing to hand the throne over to me, she is plotting to overtake it entirely."

"You want the throne?"

He'd gone this far. Given away this much of his plan. "I want my mother and sister back."

"Nothing will bring them back."

"I suppose not. Because we do not always get what we want. Thank you so very kindly for this reminder, General. You may feel free to leave me now."

"Chien." Bao pulled him back toward the bed when Chien might have stood. "You speak of treason."

Chien sighed, "I speak of nothing, General, only suggestions and hypotheticals."

"Why do you play the part of fool?" Because he was a fool. He was allowing Bao to pull him closer until Chien was snug against him. It was warm, too warm in the night heat, but Chien did not complain.

"If my aunt thought I might show any intelligence, do you think she would allow me to survive?"

Bao did not respond immediately. His lips brushed over Chien's forehead, light as a butterfly over his eyelids. He was in no hurry. He did not know that in mere hours now there would be no time. "I much prefer this version of you."

"You have said that before."

Bao's hand explored beneath his robe to rest against his chest. "What would it take to make you happy Chien?"

"Does that matter to you so much?"

"Sometimes I think you enjoy loneliness. That you want nothing more than to end your life as a miserable old man."

"Then maybe you're the fool. No one enjoys being alone." Hiding in the darkness, jumping at every sound, afraid that that might just bring the ones who would kill him. Hours. He'd hidden for hours, his mother's sword clutched tightly in his hands.

"Then stop trying to push me away. Let me help you. What would make you happy?"

His aunt's head on a pike. But that would be treason. So instead he reached up to guide Bao's lips to his own. His kiss was demanding as always. Bao wanted too much, far more than Chien would ever be able to give him. He pulled away just before Chien could fear that there was nothing left. Anymore and this man might know everything. He might know his heart. That could not be allowed.

Chien shifted his leg until Bao was cradled between his thighs. The rough cotton of the Bao's robe chafed against his skin. "Will you tell the Empress what you saw?"

"I should. I made an oath to the Empress. It is by my oath that my people are cared for and my parents are fed. Should I violate my oath and forfeit my honor?" His finger played with the soft skin of Chien's inner thigh, but he did not move further up. "Perhaps if you could convince me."

"General—Bao," Chien corrected when he saw the annoyed slash of Bao's brow, "I poured nothing into his drink."

"I am not stupid enough to believe that." His hand tightened for a moment on Chien's wrist, a quick hurt before he returned to the soft, short kisses that covered every part of his face but his mouth. "Why do you find it so difficult to tell me the truth?"

"Because this might be the end, and I do not wish to waste precious time."

Bao was angry at his statement, he could tell in the way the kisses turned into nips. Tiny sparks of pain along his neck. "Will it be worth the price? Your plan?"

His vengeance was worth everything. His vengeance was the only thing he had left that was truly his. "I do not wish to speak of this."

Bao sat up, fingers under his chin to make Chien look into his eyes, "There will come a time when you will not be able to avoid my questions."

"There will come a time when you will see the answer for yourself."

The nips moved downward toward his chest. Bao's fingers moving upward to encircle his erection in a loose grip. "Then if I can have nothing else, I will have you cry out my name."

Chien might have argued, but Bao's hand tightened, and he could not deny that the sound that left his throat was dangerously close to a whimper. "I find I do not have the patience tonight to be gentle with you." Yet contrary to his words, his hand brushed softly against Chien's cheek, "You may keep your secrets tonight, my prince. And I shall not say a word to the Empress."

"What of your loyalty?"

Bao did not respond, instead reaching for the bottle of oil kept beside Chien's bed for this very purpose. Anger made his movements rough, but he still took his time preparing Chien. Even angry he would not hurt him, and Chien wondered what sort of idiot it took not to trust this man. He had already committed himself down this path though. Too far to contemplate turning back. So he dug his fingers into Bao's shoulders, urging him to hurry, to do something. He could only hope that he might leave a bruise, some kind mark that, for a short time, Bao had been his.

There was a desperation to his movements. This might be the last time and he wanted to take it slow at the very same time he wanted to be greedy and take it all as quickly as he could. There were no more of the soft butterfly kisses, only the relentless push of Bao's erection inside of him. Only when he was seated fully inside did he lean down to take Chien's lips in a possessive kiss. The shift in position made Chien arch under him, torn between wanting to get further away from the intense pleasure and allowing himself to drown in it. Bao did not give him a choice however. His right hand tightened on Chien's waist in a way Chien knew would leave marks later.

It seemed no matter how tightly Chien clung there was no way he would keep Bao with him. It would be so much easier if he could explain it, if he could put into words why the Empress could not be allowed to live. All of this darkness had begun with pointless death and it seemed that would be the only way it would end.

He would have been content to have it last forever, to stay on that precipice of intense pleasure. But it was not possible. He came not with a shout, but with a choked whimper. He lay there pliantly in the aftermath, trying and failing to catch his breath as Bao finished, his mouth worrying the skin just above Chien's pulse. He made scarcely a sound when he came and not for the first time, Chien sincerely regretted the secrecy their affair required. In the aftermath, he could feel the gentle breeze bringing him cruelly back to reality.

"I will not tell the Empress." Bao's hoarse voice broke the silence, and though Chien knew he ought to be applauding his victory, he felt nothing but guilt. Bao was not built for this sort of deception. It would weigh heavily upon him. Bao was built for far more courageous deeds than Chien would ever accomplish.

"What would make you happy, Bao?"

Bao's mouth opened and closed a few times before he finally found his words. "It is a useless exercise to dream." He started to stand, but Chien yanked him back down until he lay beside him.

"Give me this."

"I might have liked to return to my home, to teach them the things I have learned here in the palace and ensure that they never know hunger or desperation again." His hand hovered over Chien for a moment, and Chien could see in his eyes an emotion so intense it humbled him. But he shook his head and pulled his hand away and Chien knew that he was not the only one who desperately needed distance.

And still, Chien's hand rose tentatively to brush against Bao's cheek, but Bao pulled back at the last minute. He sat over Chien for a moment, Chien's hand still awkwardly hanging in the air. "This path you're on. It only has one ending, you know."

"Success. It's the only ending I can allow myself to contemplate."

Bao did not say anything for a long minute. "I hope it is worth it then."

Chien thought of what the Empress had taken from him, what he had sacrificed so that he might finally pay back what she was owed. Thirteen years of pain could not easily be erased in a single night, but it had to begin somewhere didn't it? "It will be." He answered, though by that time his answer echoed in an empty room.

And this time, he had no one to blame but himself. It was not his aunt who had chased Bao away. It would all be worth it, he reminded himself. The goal. The end result, it was all that mattered.

His heart told him differently.

His aunt summoned him to appear in court the next morning. It was hardly surprising. Likely she wished to punish him for his actions the night before. His body ached as he dressed himself. He dismissed the servants, wanting a moment to himself. A time to mourn what he had so effectively ruined. A chance to remember the last kiss he'd shared with Bao, that possessive hunger that had seemed as if it might never be satisfied.

With a frown, he purposefully dismissed the thoughts. There would be time to linger on such things later. A time to regret and mourn. But right now, he had to focus. The Dragon had been right. There was no room for weakness in his plan. His aunt would capitalize upon any weakness and use it to destroy him. What he faced tonight was a truly dangerous foe, not a courtier caught off his guard. Tonight. Tonight. The word circled in his head. Everything was going perfectly and this would all come to an end tonight. Was that possible? The thought gave him pause.

Whatever his aunt had planned for him, however, it seemed she intended to make him wait. She busied herself seeing to the petitioners who had travelled to the palace to ask the Empress's favor. Many of them were requests that the Empress speak on their behalf to the Dragon. As the Empress was his servant, it was appropriate that she might hold his ear.

On the tier below the Empress, the two princes sat. Custom dictated that the day of a duel, the men involved should spend their day in the Meditation Hall, meditating to the Dragon. It should hardly have surprised Chien that the princes had chosen to forgo particular ritual.

Chien dug his fingers into his palm and forced himself to calm. Minh looked between Tuan and Chien with a confused look. Likely he wondered why his poison seemed not to be working properly. Chien would have to ensure that Minh could not have a chance to get him alone and demand to know what he had done.

Before long, court had ended and the room began to clear. Confused, Chien began to stand as well. His aunt's voice cut clearly through the quiet. "Not you my, dear nephew. We must speak." Fear raced through him as the ministers exited and in their place, soldiers filled the room, filing along the wall to block his escape.

His perfect plan had gone astray.

He would not show her fear. Chien turned, expression calm. "May I ask what this is for, Empress? I am truly sorry about my behavior at the banquet."

His aunt tilted her head and for a moment, he was struck by the fact that she truly was beautiful. She also wore his mother's favorite ao dai. "Dear nephew, I find I cannot help but wonder if you have the bad fortune to find yourself as some courtier's pawn. You are, after all, hardly capable of such a plan yourself."

"I'm afraid I do not understand." Somehow she'd found out. But how much did she know? Why was he still alive?

"Of course you do not." The Empress sighed, "My poor, stupid nephew, used by those who would see me thrown from my throne."

"You believe I have played part in some plan to betray you?"

A small smile played upon her lips, "I know you have played part in such a plan. And even if you have been too simple to know the truth, I still intend to see you punished."

"Killed."

"Killed? No! You must think me a barbarian. I would not kill my brother's last surviving child." She sat back fully, her fingers playing along the golden dragon head along the arm of the throne. "No, I have already made plans. What would suit you best is to remove yourself from the palace. Away from where others might manipulate you."

"You believe that I have been the victim of manipulation? To turn against you and see you destroyed?"

"Not me. My enemies would not dare attack me directly. They attack my sons instead." Chien's mind raced, but he could only think of one person who would have given her such information. Bao had promised. Twice.

But what were promises worth in the face of betrayal. A hate like he had never known welled up inside of him, threatening to burst. Underneath the hate he could feel the pain in his chest, spreading through the whole of his body in a slow, steady ache. Even the Empress's betrayal had not affected him so.

"I have heard that you were commissioned to pour poison into the princes' drinks."

"And where, my Empress, did you hear such a thing?"

"That does not matter. I had the poison replaced with water either way. But it is true, is it not?"

"Perhaps."

The Empress seemed startled by his half answer. "Now is not the time to play coy, nephew. Answer my question so that we may decide your punishment. I wish to know why you would do such a thing when I have cared for you for so long. Seen you fed and clothed. Seen you guarded. Why would you betray me?"

It was almost a relief when he snorted in laughter at her statement. Thirteen years of being someone else, and he was Prince Chien, at last, if he could only remember who Prince Chien was supposed to be in all this madness. "Cared for me? Clothed me? Surely you must take me for some kind of fool." His aunt seemed taken aback by his laughter. "You think I would ever be grateful to the woman who killed my mother and sister? To the woman who even now sits upon a throne that was never hers?"

"You speak of treason."

"You are the one who committed treason. I speak of justice." He had nothing else. No family, no love. But this he could hold fast to. Justice would not betray him. Vengeance would keep him firm. It was his fault, his weakness, for believing he could trust the general. No one could be trusted.

"You speak of things you cannot possibly understand."

"Not understand?" Chien laughed once more. "I sat there hidden amongst my mother's things and listened as you taunted her. Listened as you told her exactly who had betrayed her. The only thing I could not bear to listen to was the end. I covered my ears to drown out the sound of my mother dying."

There was a dawning realization on his aunt's face. She seemed to know now how she had been fooled. How she had underestimated him. "You hid like a coward while your mother lay dying."

"I hid under my mother's orders." But her words stung. He had hidden, hadn't he? He could have joined her. He could have fought. He could have done anything, but he had hidden instead.

"So you came to this complicated plot. You poisoned my sons hoping what? That I might feel the same thing you did? That I might be forced to watch them die?" She stood, "Did you set them against each other as well?"

"Mother! I cannot be so easily manipulated!" Minh cried. "Tuan perhaps, but I could not be manipulated by this—" Words seemed to fail him for a moment. "This fool."

"You're the fool, Minh," Tuan raged, his hand going to his weapon. "If you continue to insult me so, I will see you dead."

"Quiet!"

"Surely you realize by now that your sons are idiots. The Dragon will not bless them. He has not blessed you."

"What are you talking about?"

"You've been sending your general to find the sword. Have you found it yet?" The Empress's eyes narrowed. "You are a false Empress."

"And you are a coward. Soon, you shall be dead." She sat down once more in her throne and he could see her trying to regain her composure. She could not see around her. Could not see the doubt that had begun to form on the faces of her soldiers. "You thought you would poison my sons and then what? Come for me in the night?"

"No, my aunt. I will come for you in the broad of daylight. I will challenge you for that throne that has never once belonged to you. And I will take your head. I will show you far more honor than you showed when you came in the night for my mother's head."

She seemed visibly shaken by his words, her hand shaking as it rose. "Pity you shall never get the chance. You will be dead before nightfall."

"Your queen is afraid. She does not wish for others to know the truth." Chien did not speak to her, but to the soldiers who surrounded the room.

"Shut up, stupid child!"

"Empress, does he speak the truth? Are you not truly blessed by the Dragon?" One of the men spoke up at last.

Mai's head whirled to face him, "You will pay the price for your doubt. Take him to the grounds as well." But none of the soldiers moved to fulfill her orders. He could see the realization settling in, the panic that filled her eyes, "You would follow this child instead of me? He is a drunkard, a wastrel. He is hardly suitable for the throne. What has he done to prove himself? What lives has he taken?"

"All those responsible for the betrayal thirteen years ago. Your closest servant who spread the word, your handmaiden who carried your messages. The minister who plotted the attack. My mother's handmaiden, who took money to lure the guard away."

As he named each of her conspirators, he could see the panic rising. The silence weighed heavily and still he spoke, "The three eunuchs who assisted you. The armorer who provided the sword. The shaman who provided the poison you used to make my mother's death as painful as possible. The spineless bastards who killed my little sister."

That particular death had been as painful as he could make it. He had made sure that the man had enough clues to realize why all those involved in the coup had been dying. Enough to keep him awake at night in fear. And the night before he planned to go to the Empress and blackmail her into giving him protection, Chien had attacked.

"You," The Empress seemed to be having difficulty finding words. "You will not win this."

"I challenge you Empress."

"I refuse!"

"In front of all these soldiers? In front of your guard you refuse my challenge?" Chien smirked, "Your Empress is weak. She is afraid. And cowardice cannot be abided by the Throne of Swords."

"Quiet!" Her shriek was deafening, and she took several deep gulps of air before she could at last speak. "I will not fight you because you are not on my level. I do not display my strength by fighting those so obviously beneath me."

"The words of a coward."

"And you would know best wouldn't you, dear nephew." She spat the words and took one last deep breath. "I will not fight you, but we shall have a duel this night yet. You will fight the proper heirs for the throne. You will fight my sons."

"Mother—"

"Quiet."

Chien knew why she had decided on such a thing. She could not simply kill him. Moron he might have appeared, but Chien knew he still had supporters. Those willing to raise a coup in his name. If she killed him, she would only serve to give them a cause. If Chien died in combat, however, she would prove that her children were superior. "Spend your last hours wisely nephew."

She looked around the room, staring each of the guard in the eyes, "And when I have finished with my nephew, know now that each of you will face punishment."

The soldiers did not respond. "Call in my general. Have him escort my nephew to his rooms."

It did not take long for General Bao to appear. Seeing him hurt, but Chien swallowed it down. Pride would not allow him to do anything else. The Empress gave orders in a tight, angry voice and Bao gave him a baffled look before escorting him to his rooms. Not a word passed between them as they crossed the bridge. Chien could feel eyes upon him and wondered what they might be thinking.

When he stepped into his room, Bao followed him inside and closed the door behind him. Before he could do so much as open his mouth to speak a word, Chien rounded on him, his fist connecting solidly with Bao's nose and sending him stumbling back with a startled cry. His hand hurt. Likely his fist would be bruised, but none of that mattered now.

"You betrayed me." His voice was oddly calm as he stared down at Bao, who hadn't moved, hand prodding tentatively around his nose.

It seemed to take him a few minutes before he realized what Chien had said. "I what? Betrayed you? There is only one traitor in this room."

"You gave me your word that you would not speak to the Empress."

"And I have not." He sounded so sure of that, but there was no other way she could have known. Bao had come to him with his suspicions, threatened to tell her.

"Then how else might she know?"

"She knows?" At Chien's nod, Bao stated, "And you believe it was me. The problem with treason is that it relies on so many things, so many people who you may not be able to trust."

"I'm aware. And I trusted the wrong person. Weren't you satisfied? Did I not hold my end of the bargain?"

"Your end of the bargain?" Bao asked, his tone dangerous, "Are you implying that last night was about bargains?"

It was clear that whatever last night had been, it had not been simply a bargain to him. "Were you not the one who told me that you may not tell if I satisfied you?" Chien had not believed him when he'd stated it, but at this moment his only desire was to hurt Bao until he felt as broken as Chien himself felt.

Bao's mouth opened a few times, his face growing steadily pale. "I see." He stated at last. "You may continue to believe whatever you wish, but I broke my oath that night with you."

"And you may continue to believe whatever you wish as well. Cling to your delusion that the Empress is doing the right thing."

"I have never once said that what she has done is right."

"Then why continue to support her?"

"Of all people, you should understand best. Have you not been speaking constantly of your honor? While I am here, I can provide for my family. I can send food to my home. After she conquered us, all the Empress demanded in return was my loyalty."

"You sold yourself."

"Don't pretend to be self-righteous," Bao raged. "It is easy to sit there and judge, but you have never gone hungry or watched your people starve. You can sit here all you like and talk of how the Empress is starving her people, but you will never understand it the way I do."

"And you can bring up whatever just causes you would like. Would your people be happy knowing you've killed innocents so that they can eat?"

Bao seemed to deflate. When he spoke once more, his voice was nothing, but a harsh whisper. "Don't pretend this is about an empire. Don't pretend that you do this for anyone more than your own selfish desires."

"Regardless of the truth, the fact stands that she would see our Empire bathed in blood. Already she has weakened us to our enemies."

"And you believe that you can do better? You believe that you are not at all like her? She stole the throne from your family and now you seek to steal it from her. She began her reign in a hail of blood and you would do the same."

"Look at her sons. Look at what they have done and tell me that it is not justice."

"I question your path, Prince." Chien winced at the distance Bao's use of his title invoked. "But it is your path to walk."

"Once I have defeated her, you will be freed from your oath. You can return to your people and help them."

Bao did not acknowledge his words, instead turning and starting toward the door. "I would have helped you." Bao's words caught him by surprise. "If you had trusted me enough, I would have helped you. We could have run somewhere."

"Life has taught me that those you trust are often the first to betray you."

"I did not betray your trust." Bao repeated once more.

"Even so, it does not matter. It's better it ends this way before I am forced to face you." Chien's hand subconsciously rubbed over his heart, "I suspect you could hurt me far worse than my aunt could ever dream."

"Because you love me." It was not a question. Bao already seemed fairly confident in his answer.

And the worst part of it was that he did. Love was not this wondrous thing the poets spoke of, but a miserable and painful thing. "It is a weakness that I shall deal with."

A short snort of derisive laughter escaped Bao, "It is a pity that you have allowed the Empress to corrupt your beliefs until you are blind to the fact that love is never a weakness. It can only be the greatest of strengths." He stepped close then and kissed Chien. Unlike his kisses before, this one was soft and sweet. This was not goodbye. This was hope.

Bao pulled away, "I cannot follow you along this path, but I will pray to the Dragon that you survive." He lingered for a moment, his hand on Chien's shoulder, and Chien had the half mad hope that Bao would kiss him once more. But he pulled away instead. "Take care to prepare for your fight. The Empress will not fight fair."

Chien watched as he left, the guards outside of his room bowed to show their respect. Bao did not look back, his stride confident. He watched until Bao left his sight.

He had more reason than ever to succeed tonight. This was beyond destiny. With a sigh, he turned back and knelt beside his bed, pulling up the loosened board of wood. Bao had not said whether he returned Chien's feelings, but that was simply something further to look forward to. Once the throne had been set to rights and Mai punished, then he could ask.

The truth was, he didn't need to. Chien had never truly believed that Bao had betrayed him, but it was hard to forget that his mother had been betrayed by the sister-in-law she had trusted with her life. But Bao had broken his oath for him.

Chien lifted the box Bao had brought him as a gift, a small smile on his face. There was no way he could look at this gift and not understand Bao's feelings toward him. Not unless he was blind. He set

the box to the side and reached for another box within the hiding space. This one was a beautiful box in dark wood, decorated along the edge with the faded writing of a protection charm.

His mother had given him this box before ordering him to hide. It was important that he keep this safe, never open this box. It had been years before he had understood why his mother had ordered such a thing. Then had come the question of when it would be the right time. When would he know? When would he be ready?

Because there was one other thing he feared even more than the thought that he might forgive his aunt's betrayal. The sword of his ancestors, the sword of the Dragon. He knew the power contained within this box. The protection charm was not to keep the sword safe, but rather to keep them safe from the sword itself. It had been a long time since an emperor had been forced to draw the Sword of Heaven. Chien lifted the box into his lap, fingers dancing along the edge where the box would open.

Was he worthy of this sword? What if he tried to grasp it and found that he was as bad as his aunt? For a moment he faltered. Then he tightened his fists, remembering his resolve. Mai would pay. Not only for what she had done to his mother. Not only for what she had done to his sister, but for the suffering she had inflicted day after day over the past thirteen years.

Opening the box felt a bit anticlimactic. There were no explosions or bright flashes of light. The Dao that lay against the lining was perfectly serviceable if a little ornate. The hilt was golden, but when Chien grasped it, it didn't have the soft give of gold. Instead, it was warm in his hand. Not burning, but in a pleasant way. He'd felt this presence before, in the grove.

And just that easily, it settled around him, accepting him, welcoming him. The sword was his. The throne was as well if he could claim it.

No, there would be no 'if's. Standing, he turned back to see Bao's gift sitting behind him. It was highly inappropriate. His aunt would hate the color, hate the insult it would represent to wear the style of Xing in her court. But now was hardly the time to begin caring what she would think.

And perhaps, for the first time, love did not feel so much a weakness.

The guards who escorted him to the Hall of Dragon's Claw did so with the somber manner of escorting a man to his death. And likely they believed that would be the case. They knew only the prince who appeared more child than man.

Chien's hands tightened around the hilt of his weapon, but he did not allow himself to falter, to look anything less than completely confident in his place and in his victory. This throne was his destiny, a destiny Mai had stolen from him, a destiny he would reclaim. Still, his hands shook slightly because this was the end. Talking was cheap, planning was nice, but in the end it would come down to his strength versus that of his aunt's.

The Empress sat upon her throne, her posture relaxed and a small smile upon her face. Of course she could be confident. She had no intention of playing fair. The first time she had abandoned her honor had likely been the most difficult. Each time since then would have become easier until the only way she could see victory was through betrayal and dishonorable acts.

She would bathe the Throne of a Thousand Swords in blood, and that could be allowed no longer.

"Nephew, I have taken the liberty of securing a weapon for you."

"That will not be necessary." Chien pulled the dao from his belt, watching the way her eyes widened as recognition dawned upon her face.

"Where did you get that sword?" A hush fell over the spectators as they too began to recognize the sword in his hand.

"It was given to me."

He watched her face grow mottled with rage, "It means nothing."

"It means everything."

"I will not be held prisoner by the voices of invisible Old Gods that sit upon their pedestal and dictate what man should do. This Empire is mine. Not theirs. I earned it. I claimed it."

"You stole it."

"And you think to take it back? What makes you believe that you can do so? What makes you believe that you have the strength?"

"I could explain it, but words are meaningless. Years from now, only my actions will be remembered. You laid the parameters for this duel and I have agreed. Now," Chien flicked the sword, taking a moment to admire the balance of the weapon in his hand, "I would prefer to end this."

"Cocky little brat."

"I have waited thirteen years for this moment. Thirteen years of groveling, of watching while your disgusting sons lorded over this palace and watching as you ran this Empire into destruction. Thirteen years of watching my people turn to our enemies to save them from your rule. Thirteen years of vengeance burning inside of me. I have had thirteen years, my aunt, to contemplate the different ways I would enjoy seeing you die. And at last it will come to pass."

"Not yet my, dear nephew." She sat back in her throne, Chien's throne, and flicked her hand, "As the prince has spoken, the rules have been set forth. He has challenged his cousins for their position."

Tuan and Minh stood, and Chien realized just what she planned. "The both of them. At once."

"Better to get it over with quickly, do you not agree?"

To his surprise, it was Bao who stepped forward, "This is hardly fair, Empress."

"Quiet, General. The future of our Empire is at stake and you expect fair?"

"You would pit your trained sons against a child who has barely lifted a sword in his life." What was the Bao doing? "How would beating a single child like that show your strength to the Empire?"

"He has committed treason. I do not think he intends to stop with this attempt. What would you suggest, my General?"

"Banish him then. Or hold him under tighter guard. Make it clear how little a threat you find him."

"I wonder, General, why you plead so hard for his life."

"Because he is nothing to you, Empress, and you should show such through your actions."

The Empress seemed to honestly consider his words. "Many have considered your compassion to be your weakness, General, but I have always considered it your greatest strength. It is clear that you care for the people of this Empire. You care to ensure that my rule remains strong. Never before have I felt reason to doubt the oath you gave me when I made you general."

"I have never betrayed that oath, Empress."

"But you would now. I knew you spent time with my nephew, but I had assumed you were not a part of this plot as well. Treason carries a heavy price, Bao."

"Never once have I failed in my duty to you."

"Did you know of my nephew's plans to poison my sons before he did so?"

"I did not."

"But you did afterward." She shook her head when he did not respond. "Men are so often led by their baser instincts. There are many who could warm your bed, yet you choose the one that would have my head. I will give you one last chance for loyalty, Bao. Step aside now and you may avoid the sharp end of my sword in punishment."

"I will not."

"Then you would break your oath? You would throw away your honor? For him?" The Empress was confused, as if she could not contemplate such a possibility.

Bao did not respond to her, but Chien could see the play of emotions across his face. The toll it took for Bao to break his oath. The Empress's expression darkened. "There is a heavy price for treason,

Bao. You will discover this once I have dealt with your lover." She waved to her sons once more and they pulled their weapons.

When Bao went to pull his weapon as well, Chien stopped him with a hand on his arm. "What—"

"This is my fight." His hand tightened for a moment and he felt reluctant to let go. "Thank you. For standing with me."

"I did not betray you." But he had betrayed the Empress, and for all her wickedness, Chien could see that the betrayal weighed on him.

"I know." He'd known from the beginning, but rage had allowed him to sink into despair. He could see clearer now. If he had only not been such a fool before, he might have seen it sooner. They might have spent a few remaining hours together. "When this is all over, we will talk."

"When this is all over, you will be dead and I as well." There was no insult in Bao's voice, only the matter of fact tone of his beliefs.

"I will not allow that to happen." The sword in his hands pulsed with his conviction.

"You will not have a choice."

"Enough talk!" Chien released Bao and turned to face the Empress and her sons, his hand tightening around his weapon. "This challenge will come to an end."

Somehow, Tuan and Minh had come to a harmony of sorts. Likely a common enemy had united them. But Chien knew something they did not. It would be difficult fighting the two of them simultaneously, but he had to survive. There was so much riding upon this. So many expectations, so many lives. Though he sorely wanted to, he did not turn again to look at Bao.

It seemed at last, at the end, he was not at all alone.

Tuan attacked first, he had never learned the fine art of patience. There was no art to his thrust, only brute strength, and Chien dodged it easily. Tuan did not allow himself to become dissuaded by that. He attacked once more, and this time Chien brought his sword up to block. The force of Tuan's blow threatened to cripple his arm.

From the corner of his eye, he could see Minh sneaking forward to make his attack while Chien was distracted. He allowed himself to stumble back, enough that he was out of Minh's reach as well. From there it became a dance of dodging Tuan's strikes, which became clumsier with each missed blow, and avoiding Minh's attempts to catch him off guard. They truly did complement one another. Should they have ever settled their differences they would have been a truly terrifying duo.

But Chien had not come this far to fail. This was his destiny. His throne. His empire. And if Minh and Tuan did not intend to bow, then they had no choice but to fall.

All it took was one. One misstep by Minh in which he thrust his sword too close to his brother's skin, the sharpened sword cutting easily through the fabric. Tuan howled and stumbled back, hand going to his arm while he glared at his brother, "Are you attempting to kill me?"

"I missed. It was a mistake."

Chien stood back, dao at the ready rather than attempting to press his advantage. He could see blood spill from between Tuan's fingers as he squabbled with his brother.

"I barely nicked you!" Minh cried. "You truly are a weakling. So much for the strong and mighty Tuan. I should have known it was nothing more than an act."

"A weakling? From a man who scarcely knows what to do with a sword? All you can do is sneak behind others and steal their strength." The blood continued to flow, staining Tuan's golden robe. Chien could see that the Empress was beginning to grow angry, but no one had yet noticed. He could be patient. He could wait.

"At least I do not cry when I receive a small cut on my arm. You're barely bleeding." Minh gestured to his arm then paused. "Why are you still bleeding?"

Tuan looked down as well, eyes widening as he took in the blood that covered his hand and made its way down his sleeve. He moved his hand away from the wound, and the blood began to fall freely down his sleeve. "What have you done?" He asked his brother in a fading, horrified voice.

"Nothing, I did nothing." But Minh could not help staring in fascination at the wound.

"Summon the shaman!" The Empress declared, standing from her throne.

Before she could make her way down the tiers however, Tuan had staggered backward, raising his weapon with great effort. "You will not take the throne from me. Even in death." He thrust forward, but his arm was too weak to do much more than pierce Minh's skin.

"Tuan! Stop!" Tuan collapsed, every breath he took sending him into shudders of pain. He was feeling it now. In the moment of death, the pain would be the worst. Every part of him clinging to life while the poison slowly dragged him to the underworld. He had enough strength to shove his mother away when she would have collapsed beside him and taken hold of him. "I am the strongest," he gasped. "The most capable. I will not die here." His movements slowed and his statement faded into nothing.

Tears sat in the Empress's eyes as she stared at the body of her oldest son. The gasp of pain from behind her made her turn, and she watched as Minh clutched at his chest, the front of his robe soaked in blood. She mouthed the word 'No', but it never made it past her lips. Minh fell and she sat frozen in horror.

Silence descended within the hall.

"Do you feel the depression weighing upon you until it seems there is nothing left but despair?" Chien's words seemed a shout in the silence. "The horror that has gripped you now that you are all alone? This is but a taste of what I have suffered these thirteen years." His sword drooped, and he cradled his aching arm. Trying to block Tuan's blows had seriously injured it.

"What have you done?" His aunt's voice was hoarse with grief, her hands covered in the blood of her sons.

"My mother screamed as she died. As that poison made its way through her system, she screamed in pain. It seemed only right that I extend your sons the same courtesy you gave my mother."

"Everbloody." She brushed one last hand over Tuan's cheek before reaching for his weapon. "You will die for what you've done here today. You will never take a hold of this throne. This Empire is mine. These people are mine!"

"Perhaps. But I will take joy in the fact that if nothing else, I will take you with me. Whether I leave here or not, the Empire will never accept your rule. You are a failed Empress. You are not worthy of the Throne of a Thousand Swords. Only the strong may take the throne and you have proven time after time that you are anything but. This ends today." He tried to move his arm and hissed in pain.

"If my sons gave me nothing else, they gave me the power to end this." She flicked the sword, a hateful look on her face. "Thirteen years only to join your dear mother in the underworld. I gave her the opportunity, you know. To take her weak brood and return to her wasteland of a home. She refused. Something about her child's destiny. I did feel bad about An. That was," she paused, "an accident."

An accident. He had seen the broken, bloodied lump they'd left of his sister. Rage blinded him, but before he could step forward and take her head, an arm appeared in front of him, blocking him. "I will ask you once more, Empress. End this." Chien did not want this ended. He wanted her dead.

"She must die."

"You are injured. What hope do you think to have against her?"

The worst part of it was that Bao was right, but Chien could not stand down. His pride would not allow him. His hatred would not allow him. "Why should I step down, General, when I have the advantage?"

"Hasn't enough blood been spilled tonight?" His gaze flicked to her sons who still lay prone.

The Empress's gaze followed his. "Not nearly enough. By the time this night is over I shall see this hall bathed in blood. All of you. I will kill all of you who stood aside while this—this traitor slaughtered my children."

"Your children killed each other. The prince did not lay a hand upon them."

"Do not call him a prince! He is not a prince! He is the bastard of an iron my brother left to hang about my neck, and I will be damned if I sit aside and watch as he takes my throne. The throne goes to the strongest. The strongest here is me!"

"The Dragon has granted him his blessing."

"And look what good that has done. Look at the man your Dragon has sent you! Weak. Useless. Just like his father. Just like his whore of a mother."

Chien hissed and stepped forward to find himself once again blocked by Bao. "If you insist on this challenge then, I will accept in the prince's stead."

The Empress paused. "Barely ten minutes and already you have given your oath to another. I planned to kill you one way or another today, General. The order hardly matters to me. Come, if you think you can kill your Empress."

Bao pulled his sword and Chien grabbed desperately at his shoulder. "You cannot defeat her."

"No. I cannot." He shrugged free of Chien's grip. "But I will not watch you die while I stand helplessly aside."

"You think I could do the same? Stand aside while she kills you?" Beneath his hand, he could feel the tension in Bao's body. He practically vibrated with the urge to do something, to fix this. But this was not Bao's problem to fix. The problem was Chien's. "Have some faith in me."

Chien could see that Bao wanted to ignore him, wanted to disregard his words, but Bao was smart enough to know he had little chance and religious enough to respect the idea that Chien just might have a god's favor.

In the end, he stepped aside. Chien squeezed his arm then released him. "I will win."

Bao did not respond verbally, but he looked over to Chien and there was a wealth of response in his eyes.

His arm ached, but he could not fail, not here. Not now. The sword pulsed once more, and he could feel the warmth spreading through him again, the dragon's blessing making him forget about his aches and focus on the battle before him. The Empress did not wait for him to raise his weapon, she attacked and though his dodge was clumsy, he managed to move quick enough to avoid being caught by her sword.

"When you die, you will be the last in a line of pathetic rulers loyal to an invisible ideal." They circled each other carefully, each looking for weakness in the other's stance. He attacked and she blocked.

"Only cowards and fools feel the need to taunt their opponent once the battle has begun." She attacked and he blocked.

"You will pay for those words." She attacked once more, a series of relentless strikes that he could barely defend himself against. Just when it seemed as if she might let up, she stabbed forward once more, this attack breaking through his defense to catch him on the arm.

Chien made the mistake of reacting to the sharp sting of pain, and in his distraction, her sword stabbed into his stomach. There was a pause. Then there was the pain, the vicious claw of pain that stole his breath. This far, this long, to fail. His eyes fluttered open to see her staring at him, victory in her eyes.

"Your father wore that same startled expression in his eyes when he realized I had poisoned him." Chien's jaw clenched hard against the pain, determined not to give her the satisfaction of a single sound. "I have plotted, planned, and killed to acquire this throne. It is mine, no matter what some ancient belief claims."

"It will never be yours." He fought the urge to loosen his grip on the hilt, shifting his hand subtly while she continued to stand close to him, so sure of her victory.

"And who will stop me? You? How are we so different? You've murdered my sons, you've killed."

"Only in vengeance."

"What makes you so different from me? What makes you better?"

"I don't let my guard down because I think I've already won." He thrust upward, the sword at an angle. For a moment, just a terrible second, he thought he had missed. That he had lost his opportunity and now she would rise like some mythological monster.

But she gurgled something unintelligible and stumbled backward. There were arms around him, warm and familiar. He turned his face into Bao's neck, letting him take the sword from him and fell back against him. Bao kept saying his name, and Chien wanted to explain to him just how bothersome that was when he was trying to sleep.

Mai was dead at last. His mother and sister would rest peacefully. And maybe, finally, he could dream without the nightmare. The questions, the demands, the confusion, it all faded away into sweet, comforting black.

Odd how everything seemed brighter, more intense, after touching heaven. The doctor had ordered rest, but what did rest mean in the face of cleaning up the mess Mai had made of the country. There were questions to answer, governors to see to.

Chien ran court from his bed, keeping both the doctor and courtiers reasonably pleased. He refused to sleep in the Hall of Dragon's Rest, not while Mai's things were still there, not while her presence still lingered. The first matter to tend to had been Mai's body. The moment he had regained consciousness, they had expected him to deal with the matter.

When his mother had died, Mai had hung her body in the pavilion so that all could see the absolute power she held. Chien had ordered them to give the former Empress and her children a proper burial, however. Let the Dragon sort it out. He wouldn't damn his soul along with hers. After that came the question of the famine, and Chien had learned the cause of it. Mai had mismanaged the agricultural areas, causing the majority of crops to die out. It would take years to undo the mess she had caused.

At the very least, Chien could begin by sharing what resources the palace had and encouraging those provinces that still flourished to share with their neighbors.

Ruling was different than the ambition to rule. In his head, everything had come easily because he had known the answer to every question. In reality, he found that too often there were questions he did not know the answers to. Regiments of the army were dispatched to assist in efforts to distribute resources. Bao had been among the first to volunteer, and though Chien had worried that perhaps Bao wanted the distance from him, he had not said a word.

Early one morning after he had dismissed the courtiers and governors, he received a visitor. For a moment, he didn't recognize her. Her eyes were swollen, mouth trembling as she desperately begged him for forgiveness. It took a few minutes for him to calm her down enough that he could understand what she said.

"For the part I played in Prince Minh's deception. You were nice to me, and I am the reason that you are hurting." She looked down toward the wound and Chien self-consciously tightened his robe around himself.

The doctor believed he'd been lucky. Her blade had been clean and sharp. But it ached even now since Chien had refused the drugs that would have rid him of the ache for the price of sending him into sweet oblivion. "I am fine. And it is not your fault; you did not know what would come of it."

"He promised to leave my sister alone if I listened to him, if I did this one thing." Tears leaked from her eyes, but she stood, head high and back stiff, "I am glad that he is dead."

"I am as well." He'd known Bao was not behind it. He had known nothing of the poison Minh had given him after all, but the servant's confession made him feel all the more foolish. If only he could rewind to a few weeks before and tell his past self to appreciate the time he'd had a bit more. For one startling moment he'd known what it meant not to be alone.

He might have considered it the cruelest punishment of all, but he could only imagine what might have happened had he never found what it felt like. Perhaps he might have turned into Mai after all. With a sigh, he resigned himself to staring out at his garden, studying the browned leaves of the trees.

"That is a very full sigh for such a busy man. Perhaps you need more work to sustain you."

Chien thought at first that he had conjured Bao as some feverish, depressed fantasy. But there was no way it was possible. Bao was there, taking up the whole of the room with his presence. Chien moved forward, not truly sure what he was attempting to accomplish, but the sharp pain of his stomach reminded him to stay put.

It didn't matter, because Bao moved closer, taking a seat beside him after a pause. "The doctor says you would be doing better if you took his advice."

"I am fine."

"I see." Bao looked amused and it was at once so familiar that Chien wanted to take hold of him and order him to never leave again. "Would you like to know how your Empire fares?"

It was to be business then. Fair enough. "Of course."

Bao talked and Chien was happy to let the familiarity of his voice pull him closer and closer to an easy sleep, something that had been eluding him since the night he had awoken to hear that his general had left him. "Have you fallen asleep?"

Chien's eyes popped open, denial already on his lips as he looked toward the window and noticed that the sun had begun to set. "Perhaps."

"If you are tired, Emperor, I can return another time." Bao made to stand.

"Why do you choose now to call me by a title? You never did before."

"I did. Near the end." Bao's hand drifted closer to his, "I would hate to be accused of being too familiar with our emperor."

Chien moved that last little distance between their hands, grasping Bao's hand tightly, "Stay."

"For how long? The sun has nearly set."

"There is an Empire to be run. A famine to end. Traitors to weed out." His hand tightened on Bao's, "Forever may be long enough."

## Bio

Isabella has been torturing her players for years with character breaking plot twists and loving reminders of suffering to come. Now that she had retired from her illustrious career as a GM, she's turned to making her characters suffer just as much. The time she isn't writing she spends at her job as a computer technician wishing she was right back at home, writing.

Despite this, Isabella continues to be a self-proclaimed romantic. A childhood of Disney movies has taught her that there is no ending as satisfying as a happily ever after.