

THE
QUANTUM
ROSE

CATHERINE ASARO



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Praise for the Saga of the Skolian Empire

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Copyright

This book is dedicated to three exceptional people: the scientists, teachers, and role models who taught me quantum theory

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Eric Heller

Kate Kirby

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Ironbridge

First Scattering Channel

Kamoj Quanta Argali, the governor of Argali Province, shot through the water and broke the surface of the river. Basking in the day's beauty, she tilted her face up to the violet sky. The tiny disk of the sun, was so bright she didn't dare look near it. Curtains of green and gold light shimmered across the heavens in an aurora visible even in the afternoon.

Her bodyguard Lyode stood on the bank, surveying the area. Lyode's true name was a jumble of words from the ancient language Iotaca, which scholars pronounced as *light emitting diode*. No one knew what it meant, though, so they all called her Lyode.

Unease prickled Kamoj. She treaded water, her hair swirling around her body, wrapping her slender waist and then letting go. Her reflection showed a young woman with black curls framing her heart-shaped face. She had dark eyes, as did most people in the province of Argali, though hers were larger than usual, with long lashes that right now sparkled with droplets of water.

Nothing seemed wrong. Reeds as red as pod-plums nodded on the bank, and six-legged lizards scuttled through them, glinting blue and green among the stalks. A few paces behind Lyode, the prismatic forest began. Up the river, in the distant north, the peaks of the Rosequartz Mountains floated like clouds in the haze. She drifted around to the other bank, but saw nothing amiss there either. Tubemoss covered the hills in a turquoise carpet broken by stone outcroppings that gnarled up like the knuckles of a buried giant.

What bothered her wasn't unease exactly, more a troubled anticipation. She supposed she should feel guilty about swimming here, but it was hard to summon that response on such a lovely day. The afternoon hummed with life, golden and cool.

Kamoj sighed. As much as she enjoyed her swim, invigorated by the chill water and air, she didn't have her position as governor to consider. Swimming naked, even in this secluded area, hardly qualified as dignified. She glided to the bank and clambered out, reeds slapping against her body.

Her bodyguard continued to scan the area. Lyode suddenly stiffened, staring across the water. She reached over her shoulder for the ballbow strapped to her back.

Puzzled, Kamoj glanced back. A cluster of greenglass stags had appeared from behind a hill on the other side of the river, each animal with a rider astride its long back. Sunrays splintered against the green scales that covered the stags. Each stood firm on its six legs, neither stamping nor pawing the air. With their iridescent antlers spread to either side of their heads, they shimmered in the blue-tinged

sunshine.

Their riders were all watching her.

Sweet Airys, Kamoj thought, mortified. She ran up the slope to where she had left her clothes in a pile behind Lyode. Her bodyguard was taking a palm-sized marble ball out of a bag on her belt. She slapped it into the targeting tube of her crossbow, which slid inside an accordion cylinder. Drawing back the bow, Lyode sighted on the watchers across the river.

Of course, here in the Argali, Lyode's presence was more an indication of Kamoj's rank than an expectation of danger. Indeed, none of the watchers drew his bow. They looked more intrigued than anything else. One of the younger fellows grinned at Kamoj, his teeth flashing white in the streaming sunshine.

"I can't believe this," Kamoj muttered. She stopped behind Lyode and scooped up her clothes. Drawing her tunic over her head, she added, "Thashaverlyster."

"What?" Lyode said.

Kamoj jerked down the tunic, covering herself with soft gray cloth as fast as possible. Lyode stayed in front of her, keeping her bow poised to shoot. Kamoj counted five riders across the river, all in copper breeches and blue shirts, with belts edged by feathers from the blue-tailed quetzal.

One man sat a head taller than the rest. Broad-shouldered and long-legged, he wore a midnight blue cloak with a hood that hid his face. His stag lifted its front two legs and pawed the air, its black hooves glinting like glass, though they were a hardier material, hornlike and durable. The man ignored its restless motions, keeping his cowed head turned toward Kamoj.

"That's Havyrl Lionstar," Kamoj repeated as she pulled on her gray leggings. "The tall man on the big greenglass."

"How do you know?" Lyode asked. "His face is covered."

"Who else is that big? Besides, those riders are wearing Lionstar colors." Kamoj watched the group set off, cantering into the blue-green hills. "Hah! You scared them away."

"With five against one? I doubt it." Lyode gave her a dry look. "More likely they left because the show is over."

Kamoj winced. She hoped her uncle didn't hear of this. As the only incorporated man in Argali, Maxard Argali had governed the province for Kamoj in her youth. In the years since she had become an adult, Kamoj had shouldered the responsibility of leading her people and province. But Maxard, her only living kin, remained a valued advisor.

Lionstar's people were the only ones who might reveal her indiscretion, though, and they rarely came to the village. Lionstar had "rented" the Quartz Palace in the mountains for more than a hundred days now, and in that time no one she knew had seen his face. Why he wanted a ruined palace she had no idea, given that he refused all visitors. When his emissaries had inquired about it, she and Maxard had been dismayed by the suggestion that they let a stranger take residence in the honored, albeit disintegrating, home of their ancestors. Kamoj still remembered how her face had heated as she listened to the outlanders explain their leige's "request."

However, no escape had existed from the “rent” Lionstar’s people put forth. The law was clear: slaves and Maxard had to best his challenge or bow to his authority. Impoverished Argali could never match such an offer: shovels and awls forged from fine metals, stacks of firewood, golden bridle bells, dewhoney and molasses, dried rose-leeks, cobber-wheat, tri-grains, and reedflour that poured through your fingers like powdered rubies.

So they yielded—and an incensed Maxard had demanded that Lionstar pay a rent of that same worth every fifty days. It was a lien so outrageous, all Argali had feared Lionstar would send his soldiers to “renegotiate.”

Instead, the cowed stranger had paid.

With Lyode at her side, Kamoj entered the forest. Walking among the trees, with tubemoss under her bare feet, made her even more aware of her precarious position. Why had he come riding here? Did he also have an interest in her lands? She had invested his rent in machinery and tools for farms in Argali. As much as she disliked depending on a stranger, it was better than seeing her people starve. But she couldn’t bear to lose more to him, especially not this forest she loved.

So. She would have to inquire into his activities and see what she could discover.

The beauty of the forest helped soothe her concern. Drapes of moss hung on the trees, and shadow ferns nodded around their trunks. Argali vines hung everywhere, heavy with the blush-pink roses that gave her home its name. Argali. It meant “vine rose” in Iotaca.

At least, most scholars translated it as rose. One fellow insisted it meant resonance. He also claimed they misspelled Kamoj’s middle name, Quanta, an Iotaca word with no known translation. The name *Kamoj* came from the Iotaca word for *bound*, so if this odd scholar was correct, her name meant *Bound Quantum Resonance*. She smiled at the absurdity. *Rose* made more sense, of course.

The vibrant life in the autumnal woods cheered Kamoj. Camouflaged among the roses, puff lizards swelled out their red sacs. A ruffling breeze parted the foliage to let a sunbeam slant through the forest, making the scale-bark on the trees sparkle. Then the ray vanished and the forest returned to its dusky violet shadows. A thornbat whizzed by, wings beating furiously. It homed in on a lizard and stabbed its needled beak into the red sac. As the puff deflated with a whoosh of air, the lizard scrambled away, leaving the disgruntled thornbat to dart on without its prey.

Powdered scales drifted across Kamoj’s arm. She wondered why people had no scales. The inconsistency had always puzzled her, since her early childhood. Most everything else on Balumil, the world, had them. Scaled tree roots swollen with moisture churned the soil. The trees grew slowly, converting water into stored energy to use during the long summer droughts and endless winter snow. Unlike people, who fought to survive throughout the grueling year, seasonal plants grew only in the gentler spring and autumn. Their big, hard-scaled seeds lay dormant until the climate was to their liking.

Sorrow brushed Kamoj’s thoughts. If only people were as well adapted to survive. Each Long Year they struggled to replenish their population after the endless winter decimated their numbers. Last winter they had lost even more than usual to the blizzards and brutal ices.

Including her parents.

Even after so long, that loss haunted her. She had been a small child when she and Maxard, her mother's brother, became sole heirs to the impoverished remains of a province that had once been proud.

Will Lionstar take what little we have left? She glanced at Lyode, wondering if her bodyguard shared her concerns. A tall woman with lean muscles, Lyode had the dark eyes and hair common in Argali. Here in the shadows, the vertical slits of her pupils widened until they almost filled her irises. She carried Kamoj's boots dangling from her belt. She and Kamoj had been walking together in comfortable silence.

"Do you know the maize-girls who do chores in the kitchen?" Kamoj asked.

Lyode turned from her scan of the forest and smiled at Kamoj. "You mean the three children? Take care of your elbow?"

"That's right." Kamoj chuckled, thinking of the girls' bright energy and fantastic stories. "They told me, in solemn voices, that Havyrl Lionstar came here in a cursed ship that the wind chased across the sky, and that he can never go home because he's so loathsome the elements refuse to let him sail again." Her smile faded. "Where do these stories come from? Apparently most of Argali believes in them. They say he's centuries old, with a metal face so hideous it will give you nightmares."

The older woman spoke quietly. "Legends often have seeds in truth. Not that he's supernatural, but that his behavior makes people fear him."

Kamoj had heard too many tales of Lionstar's erratic behavior to dismiss them. Since he had come to Argali, she had several times seen his wild rides herself, from a distance. He tore across the landscape like a madman.

Watching her closely, Lyode lightened her voice. "Well, you know, with the maize-girls, who can they say? They tried to convince me that Argali is haunted. They think that's why all the light panels have gone dark."

Kamoj gave a soft laugh, relieved to change the subject. "They told me that too. They weren't too specific on who was haunting what, though." Legend claimed the Current had once lit all the houses here in the Northern Lands. But that had been centuries past, even longer in the North Sky Islands where the Current had died thousands of years ago. The only reason one light panel worked in Argali House, Kamoj's home, was because her parents had found a few intact fiber-optic threads in the ruins of the Quartz Palace.

The panel intrigued Kamoj as much as it baffled her. It linked to cables that climbed up inside the walls of the house until they reached the few remaining sun-squares on the roof. No one understood the panel, but Lyode's husband, Opter, could make it work. He had no idea why, nor could he fix the damaged components, but given undamaged parts he had an uncanny ability to fit them into the panels.

"Hai!" Kamoj winced as a twig stabbed her foot. Lifting her leg, she saw a gouge between her toes, welling with blood.

“A good reason to wear your shoes,” Lyode said.

“Pah.” Kamoj enjoyed walking barefoot, but it did have drawbacks.

A drumming that had been tugging at her awareness finally intruded enough to make her listen.

“Those are greenglass stags.”

Lyode tilted her head. “On the road to Argali.”

Kamoj grinned. “Come on. Let’s go look.” She started to run, then hopped on her good foot and settled for a limping walk. When they reached the road, they hid behind the trees, listening to the thunder of hooves.

“I’ll bet it’s Lionstar,” Kamoj said.

“Too much noise for only five riders,” Lyode said.

Kamoj gave her a conspiratorial look. “Then they’re fleeing bandits. We should nab them!”

“And just why,” Lyode inquired, “would these nefarious types be fleeing up a road that goes straight to the house of the central authority in this province, hmmm?”

Kamoj laughed. “Stop being so sensible.”

Lyode still didn’t look concerned. But she slipped out a bowball anyway and readied her bow.

Down the road, the first stags came around a bend. Their riders made a splendid sight. The men wore gold diskmail, ceremonial, too soft for battle, designed to impress. Made from beaten disks, the vests were layered to create an airtight garment. They never attained that goal, of course. Why anyone would want airtight mail was a mystery to Kamoj, but tradition said to do it that way, so that was how they made the garments.

On rare occasions, stagmen also wore leggings and a hood of mail. Some ancient drawings even showed mail covering the entire body, including gauntlets, knee boots, and a transparent cover for the face. Kamoj thought the face cover must be artistic fancy. She saw no reason for it.

Her uncle’s stagmen gleamed today. Under their vests, they wore bell-sleeved shirts as gold as suncorn. Their gold breeches tucked into dark red knee-boots fringed by feathers from the green-tailed quetzal. Twists of red and gold ribbon braided their reins, and bridle bells chimed on their greenglass stags. Sunlight slanted down on the road, drawing sparkles from the dusty air.

Lyode smiled. “Your uncle’s retinue makes a handsome sight.”

Kamoj didn’t answer. Normally she enjoyed watching Maxard’s honor guard, all the more so because of her fondness for the riders, most of whom she had known all her life. They served Maxard well. His good-natured spirit made everyone like him, which was why a wealthy merchant woman from the North Sky Islands was courting him despite his small corporation. However, today he wasn’t with his honor guard. He had sent them to Ironbridge a few days ago, and now they returned with an esteemed guest—someone Kamoj had no desire to see.

The leading stagmen were riding past her hiding place, the bi-hooves of their mounts stirring up scale dust from the road. She recognized the front rider. Gallium Sunsmith. Seeing him made her dark eyes brighten. A big, husky man with a friendly face, Gallium worked with his brother Opter in a sunshop engineering gadgets that ran on light, like the mirror-driven pepper mill Opter had invented. Gallium

also made a good showing for himself each year in the swordplay exhibition at festival. So when Maxard needed an honor guard, Gallium became a stagman.

Down the road, more of the party came into view. These new riders wore black mail, with dark purple shirts and breeches, and black boots fringed by silver fur. Jax Ironbridge, the governor of Ironbridge Province, rode in their center. Long-legged and muscular, taller than the other stagmen, he had a handsome face with strong lines, chiseled like granite. Silver streaked his black hair. He sat astride Mistrider, a huge greenglass stag with a rack of cloud-tipped antlers and scales the color of the opal-mists that drifted in the northern mountains.

Kamoj's pleasure in the day faded. Still hidden, she turned away from the road. She leaned against the tree with her arms crossed, staring into the forest while she waited for the riders to pass.

A flight-horn sounded behind her, its call winging through the air. She jumped, then spun around. Apparently she wasn't as well-concealed as she thought; Jax had stopped on the road and was watching her, the curved handle of a horn in his hand.

Kamoj flushed, knowing she had given offense by hiding. Her merger with Jax had been planned for most of her life. He had the largest corporation in the northern provinces, which consisted of Argali, the North Sky Islands, and Ironbridge. Argument existed about the translation of the Iotac word *corporation*: for lack of a better interpretation, most scholars assumed it meant a man's dowry—the property and wealth he brought into marriage. A corporation as big as Jax's became a political tool, invoking the same law of “Better the offer or yield” as had Lionstar's rent.

Ironbridge, however, had given Argali a choice. Jax made an offer Kamoj and Maxard could have bettered. It would have meant borrowing from even the most impoverished Argali farmers, but besting the amount by one stalk of bi-wheat was all it took. Then they could have declined the marriage offer and repaid the loans. She had been tempted to try. But Argali was her responsibility, and her province needed this merger with flourishing Ironbridge. So she had agreed.

Jax watched her with an impassive gaze. He offered his hand. “I will escort you back to Argali house.”

“I thank you for your kind offer, Governor Ironbridge,” she said. “But you needn't trouble yourself.”

He gave her a cold smile. “I am pleased to see you as well, my love.”

Hai! She hadn't meant to further the insult. She stepped forward and took his hand. He lifted her onto the stag with one arm, a feat of strength few other riders could manage even with a child, let alone an adult. He turned her so she ended up sitting sideways on the greenglass, her hips fitted in front of the first boneridge that curved over its back. Jax sat behind her, astride the stag, between the first and second boneridges, his muscular legs pressed against her hips and leg.

The smell of his diskmail wafted over her, rich with oil and sweat. As he bent his head to hers, she drew back in reflex. She immediately regretted her response. Although Jax showed no outward anger, a muscle in his cheek twitched. She tried not to flinch as he took her chin in his hand and pulled her head forward. Then he kissed her, pressing her jaw until it forced her mouth open for his tongue.

Despite her efforts, she tensed and almost clamped her mouth shut. He clenched his fist around her upper arm to hold her in place.

A rush of air thrummed past Kamoj, followed by the crack of a bowball hitting a tree and the shimmering sound of falling scales. Jax raised his head. Lyode stood by the road, a second ball knocked in her bow, her weapon aimed at Jax.

The Argali and Ironbridge stagmen had all drawn their bows and trained their weapons on Lyode. They looked acutely uncomfortable. No one wanted to shoot Kamoj's bodyguard. The Argali stagmen had grown up with her, and Gallium was her brother-in-law. Jax had visited Kamoj at least twice each short-year for most of her life, since their betrothal, so the Ironbridge stagmen also knew Lyode well. However, they couldn't ignore that she had just sent a bow-ball hurtling within a few hand-spans of the two governors.

In a chill voice only Kamoj could hear, Jax said, "Your hospitality today continues to amaze me." Turning to Gallium Sunsmith, he spoke in a louder voice. "You. Escort Lyode back to Argali House."

Gallium answered carefully. "It is my honor to serve you, sir. But perhaps Governor Argali would also like to do her best by Ironbridge, by accompanying her bodyguard back."

Kamoj almost swore. She knew Lyode and Gallium meant well, and she valued their loyalty, but she wished they hadn't interfered. It would only earn them Jax's anger. She and Jax had to work things out. Although their merger favored Ironbridge, it gave control to neither party. They would share authority, she focused on Argali and he on Ironbridge. It benefited neither province if their governors couldn't get along.

Perhaps she could still mollify Jax. "Please accept my apologies, Governor Ironbridge. I will discuss Lyode's behavior with her on the walk back. We'll straighten this out."

He reached down and grasped her injured foot, bending her leg at the knee so he could inspect her instep. "Can you walk on this?"

"Yes." The position he was holding her leg in was more uncomfortable than the gouge itself.

"Very well." As he let go, his fingers scraped the gash between her toes. Kamoj stiffened as pain shot through her foot. She didn't think he done it on purpose, but she couldn't be sure.

She slid off the stag, taking care to land on her other foot. As she limped over to Lyode, bi-hooves scuffed behind her. She turned to see the riders thundering away, up the road to Argali.

The Offer

Incoming Wave

Jul, the sun, had sunk behind the trees by the time Kamoj and Lyode walked around the last bend of the road, into view of Argali House. Seeing her home, Kamoj's spirits lifted.

Legend claimed the house had once been luminous pearl, all one surface with no seams. According to the temple scholar, who could read bits of the ancient codices, Argali House had been grown in a huge vat of liquid, on a framework of machines called *nanobots*, which were supposedly so tiny you couldn't see them even with a magnifying glass. After these machines completed the house, one was to believe they simply swam away and fell apart.

Kamoj smiled. Absurdities filled the old scrolls. During one of her visits to Ironbridge, about ten years ago, Jax had shown her one in his library. The scroll claimed that Balumil, the world, went around Jul in an "elliptical orbit" and rotated on a tilted axis. This tilt, and their living in the north, was purported to explain why nights were short in summer and long in winter, fifty-five hours of darkness on the longest night of the year, leaving only five hours of sunlight.

She had always thought it strange how her people counted time. One year consisted of four seasons, of course: spring, summer, autumn, winter. They called it the Long Year. A person could be born, reach maturity, wed, and have a baby within one Long Year. For some reason her ancestors considered this a long time: hence the name. Even more inexplicable, they divided the Long Year into twenty equal periods called short-years, five per season. People usually just called those "years." But really, it made no sense. Why call it a short-year? The scroll claimed this odd designation came about because the time span came close to a "standard" year.

Standard for what?

Still, she found it more credible than too-little-to-see machines. Whatever the history of Argali House, it was wood and stone now, both the main building and the newer wings that rambled over the cleared land. Huge stacks of firewood stood along one side, stores for winter. Seeing them gave her satisfaction, knowing that preparations for the harsh season were well under way.

Bird-shaped lamps hung from the eaves, rocking in the breezes, their glass tinted in Argali colors—rose, gold, and green. Their radiance created a dam against the purple shadows pooled under the trees. The welcome sight spread its warmth over Kamoj. Here in the road, a fluted post stood like a sentinel. A lantern molded and tinted like a rose hung from a scalloped hook at its top, its glow beckoning them home.

They entered the front courtyard by a gate engraved with vines. Five stone steps ran the length of the house, leading up to a terrace, and five doors were set at even intervals along the front. The central door was larger than the others, stuccoed white and bordered by hieroglyphs in rose, green, and gold with luminous blue accents.

As they neared the house, Kamoj heard voices. By the time they reached the steps, it resolved into two men arguing.

“That sounds like Ironbridge,” Lyode said.

“Maxard too.” Kamoj paused, her foot on the first step. Now silence came from within the house.

Above them, the door slammed open. Maxard stood framed in its archway, a burly man in old-fashioned clothes. His garb startled Kamoj more than his sudden appearance. By now he should have been decked out in ceremonial dress and mail, ready to greet Ironbridge. Yet he looked as if he hadn’t even washed up since coming in from the fields.

He spoke to her in a low voice. “You’d better get in here.”

Kamoj hurried up the steps. “What happened?”

He didn’t answer, just moved aside to let her enter a small foyer paved with white tiles bordered by Argali rose designs.

Boots clattered in the hall beyond. Then Jax swept into the entrance foyer with five stagmen. He paused in midstride when he saw Kamoj. He stared at her, caught in a look of fury, and surprise too, as if he hadn’t expected to reveal the intensity of his reaction to her. Then he went to Maxard, towering over the younger man.

“We aren’t through with this,” Jax said.

“The decision is made,” Maxard told him.

“Then you are a fool.” Jax glanced at Kamoj, his face stiff now with a guarded emotion, one he hid too well for her to identify. In all the years she had known him, he had never shown such a strong response, except in anger. But this was more than rage. Shock? Emotional *pain*? Surely not from Jax, the pillar of Ironbridge. Before she had a chance to speak, he strode out of the house with his stagmen ignoring Lyode, who stood just outside the door.

Kamoj turned to her uncle. “What’s going on?”

He shook his head, his motion strained. Lyode came up the stairs, but when she tried to enter Maxard braced his hand against the door frame, blocking her way. He spoke with uncharacteristic anger. “What blew into your brain, Lyode? Why did you have to *shoot* at him? Of all days I didn’t need Jax Ironbridge angry, this was it.”

“He was mistreating Kamoj,” Lyode replied.

“So Gallium Sunsmith says.” Maxard frowned at Kamoj. “What were you doing running around the woods like a wild animal?”

She would have bristled at the rebuke, except it was too far outside his usual congenial nature to make sense. She always walked in the woods after she finished working in the stables. He often came with her, the two of them discussing projects for Argali or enjoying each other’s company.

She spoke quietly. "What is it, Uncle? What's wrong?"

He pushed his hand through his dark hair. "We can meet later in the library. You've several petitioners waiting for you now."

She studied his face, trying to fathom what troubled him. No hints showed. So she nodded, to him and to Lyode. Then she limped into her house.

* * *

For her office, Kamoj had chosen a large room on the ground floor. Its tanglebirch paneling glimmered with blue and green highlights in scale patterns. The comfortable old armchairs were upholstered in gold, with a worn pattern of roses. Stained glass lanterns hung on the walls. She did not sit behind her tanglebirch desk; she had always felt it distanced her from people.

A carafe of water waited on one table, with four finely cut tumblers. Kamoj was pouring herself a drink when the housemaid showed in her first visitors, Lumenjack Donner, a broad-shouldered man with brown eyes, and Photax Prior, a much slimmer man who could juggle light-spheres like no one else in Argali. Both were wearing freshly cleaned homespun clothes and carrying their best hats, with their dark hair uncut but well-brushed for this meeting. They bowed to her.

Kamoj beamed at them, a smile warming her face. She had known both farmers all her life. "My greetings, Goodmen."

Lumenjack's deep voice rumbled. "And to you, Governor."

"Tidings, Gov'ner." Photax's hands moved restlessly on his hat as if he wanted to juggle.

She indicated the armchairs. "Have a seat, please. Would either of you like water?"

Both declined as they settled in the chairs. Kamoj sat in one at right angles to theirs, so she could watch their faces and judge their moods. "What can I do for you today?"

Lumenjack spoke up. "Photax be cheating me, ma'am. I come to ask your help."

"It's a twiddling lie, it is," Photax declared.

Kamoj suspected that if they had agreed to seek an arbitrator, the situation was probably salvageable. "What seems to be the problem?"

Lumenjack crossed his arms, accenting his husky build. "Photax is plowing my land and taking my crops."

"It's my land!" Photax gave Kamoj his most sincere look. "He traded it to me last year when he juggled for his daughter at the festival."

Lumenjack made an incredulous noise. "I wouldn't give you my *land* for throwing pretty gigags into the air." He turned to Kamoj. "I said he could have the crops, just last year, from a strip of my land that borders his."

"You said the land!"

"I meant the crops!"

Photax shot Kamoj a beseeching look. "He be going back on his bargain, Gov'nor."

Kamoj rubbed her chin. "Photax, do you really think such a parcel of land is a fair trade for

juggling show?”

“That’s not the point. He made a deal and now he’s reneging.” Photax glowered at Lumenjack. “You’re as crazy as that madman Lionstar.” To Kamoj, he added, “Begging your pardon, ma’am, Lionstar rode through my fields yesterday and tore up my bi-grains.”

Kamoj didn’t like the implications. Lionstar seemed to be stirring from his borrowed palace more often lately. “Did he recompense you for the damage?”

“Nary a bridal bell. He doesn’t even stop.” Photax gave a theatrical shudder. “He was riding like a man possessed. He’s a cursed one, he is.”

She doubted it involved any curses. Lionstar’s destructive behavior was problem enough by itself. “I will send a messenger to the palace. If he wrecked your crops, he owes you for them.”

Photax looked mollified. “I’d be right obliged if you would do that, Gov’ner.”

“That’s why you’re so set on Lumenjack’s land, isn’t it? Because you’re going to be short this year.”

“I can’t feed a family by juggling balls,” Photax said.

“So if you get your recompense,” Lumenjack said, “will you quit trying to steal my land?”

“*Steal?*” Photax bristled at him. “I don’t steal. You *gave* it to me!”

“Why would I do something so stupid?” Lumenjack demanded. “What, I’m going to feed my family rocks?”

Photax shifted in his chair, his mobile face showing less confidence now. “I heard you say it. So did my wife and other people.”

Lumenjack made an exasperated noise. “If I said the land, instead of last year’s crops on the land, it was a mistake.”

“You gave your word,” Photax repeated.

Kamoj sighed. Technically, if Lumenjack had given his word, he did owe Photax the land. But the mistake was so obvious, she couldn’t imagine Photax holding him to it if he hadn’t already been in trouble due to Lionstar’s rampage. “How about this? Photax, I will see to your compensation for the crop damage. For the disputed land, why don’t you and Lumenjack split the yield this year and then call the debt done, with Lumenjack keeping his land. That way, neither of you suffers unduly from the mix-up.”

“I don’t like giving him half my crops for nothing,” Lumenjack grumbled. After a pause, he added, “But I will agree.”

Photax moved his hands as if he were feeling the weight of light-spheres. “All right.” He stopped his ghost juggling and frowned at Kamoj. “Do you think Lionstar will make good?”

“I can’t say.” She doubted it, but she didn’t want to sound negative. “If he doesn’t, Argali House can help you from our yield this year.”

“It be right decent of you, Gov’ner.”

“I wish I could do more.” Her province needed so much. Not for the first time, she wondered if she should hasten her merger with Jax, to ensure Ironbridge support. After what had happened today

though, she dreaded facing his temper.

She talked more with Photax and Lumenjack, catching up on news of their families. They took their leave on better terms than when they had entered, though now they were arguing about whose son could throw a bowball farther.

She next met with the representatives of several committees she had set up: the storage group, which worked to ensure Argali had stocks of grain for the coming winter, when the village would live off crops grown during autumn; the midwives, who discussed childbirth techniques, with the hope that sharing knowledge would decrease Argali's heartbreaking infant mortality rate; and the festival group that planned the harvest celebrations.

The housemaid finally announced her last visitor, Lystral, or *Liquid Crystal*, an older woman who was well-liked in the village. Instead of arriving with her usual good nature, today Lystral stalked into the room. She wasted no time on amenities. "Well, so, Governor, have you done anything about the maniac?"

Standing by her armchair, Kamoj blinked. "Maniac?"

"Lionstar!" Lystral's scowl deepened the lines around her eyes. "That misbegotten demon-spawn of a maddened spirit raised from the dead to bedevil the good folk of this land."

Kamoj held back her smile. Granted, Lionstar was a problem, but she suspected it had more to do with human misdeeds than misbegotten spirits. "What happened?"

"He and a pack of his stagmen stopped at my daughter's house in the country, where my grandchildren were playing. He jumped down at the well, helped himself to water, and broke the chain on the bucket. He's a demonic one, I tell you. No normal man could break that chain—and Lionstar didn't even notice! He scared the little ones so much, they almost jumped from here to the Thermal Coast. Then he just got on his greenglass and rode off. Never even pulled down his cowl. Not that any of us *want* to see his pud-ugly face." She put her fists on her hips. "At least his stagman had the decency to apologize before they went tearing after him."

"I'm sorry he frightened your family, Lystral. I'm sending an emissary to the palace. I will include a protest about his behavior and a statement of the recompense he owes you for fixing the well."

"I be thanking you, ma'am." Lystral shook her head. "I wish he would leave Argali alone."

Kamoj also wished so. However, he had a right to the palace as long as he paid the rent. She just hoped Argali could weather his tenancy.

* * *

The centuries had warped the library door-arch beyond simple repair. Kamoj leaned her weight into the door to shove it closed. Inside the library, shelves filled with codices and books covered the walls. The lamp by Maxard's favorite armchair shed light over a table. A codex lay there, a parchment scroll made from the soft inner bark of a sunglass tree and painted with gesso, a smooth plaster. Glyphs covered it, delicate symbols inked in Argali colors. Kamoj could decipher almost none of the symbols. Now that she had taken primary responsibility for Argali, Maxard had more time for his scholarship.

He was learning to read.

Behind her the door scraped open, and she turned to see her uncle. With no preamble, he said, “Come see this.”

Puzzled, she went with him to an arched door in the far wall. The storeroom beyond had once held carpentry tools, but those were long gone, sold by her grandparents to buy grain. Maxard fished a skeleton key out of his pocket and opened the moongloss door. Unexpectedly, oil lamps lit the room beyond. Kamoj stared past him—and gasped.

Urns, boxes, chests, huge pots, finely wrought buckets: they crammed the storeroom full and overflowing. Gems filled baskets, heaped like fruits, spilling onto the floor, diamonds that split the light into rainbows, opals as brilliant as greenglass scales, rose-rubies the size of fists, sapphires, topazes, amethysts, star-eyes, jade, turquoise. She walked forward, and her foot kicked an emerald the size of a polestork egg. It rolled across the floor and hit a bar of metal.

Metal. Bars lay in tumbled piles: gold, silver, copper, bronze. Sheets of rolled platinum sat on cornucopias filled with fruits, flowers, and grains. Glazed pots brimmed with vegetables and spices, racks hung from the wall. Bracelets, anklets, and necklaces lay everywhere, wrought from gold and studded with jewels. A chain of diamonds lay on top a silver bowl heaped with eider plums. Just as valuable, dried foodstuffs filled cloth bags and woven baskets. Nor had she ever seen so many bolts of rich cloth: glimsilks, brocades, rose-petal, satins, gauzy scarves shot through with metallic threads, scale-velvets, plush and sparkling.

And light strings! At first Kamoj thought she mistook the clump on a pile of crystal goblets. But it was real. She picked up the bundle of threads. They sparkled in the lamplight, perfect, no damage at all. This one bundle could repair broken Current threads throughout the village, and it was only one of several in the room.

Turning to Maxard, she spread out her arms, the threads clutched in one fist. “This is—it’s—is this ours?”

He spoke in a cold voice. “Yes. It’s ours.”

“But Maxard, why do you look so dour!” A smile broke out on her face. “This could support Argava for years! How did it happen?”

“You tell me.” He came over to her. “Just what did he give you out there today?”

He? She lowered her arms. “Who?”

“Havyrl Lionstar.”

She would never have guessed Lionstar would see to his debts with such phenomenal generosity. This was so far beyond any expected recompense for Photax and Lystral’s family, she couldn’t begin to comprehend his intent. “Why did he send it here?”

“You tell me. You’re the one who saw him.”

Hai! So Maxard had heard about the river. “I didn’t know he was watching.”

“Watching what?”

“Me swimming.”

“Then what?”

Baffled, she said, “Then nothing.”

“Nothing?” Incredulity crackled in his voice. “What did you promise him, Kamoj? What sweet words did you whisper to compromise his honor?”

She couldn’t imagine any woman having the temerity to try compromising the huge, brooding Lionstar. “What are you talking about?”

“You promised to marry him if he gave you what you wanted, didn’t you?”

“What?”

His voice snapped. “Isn’t that why he sent this dowry?”

Dowry? Sweet Airys, now what? “That’s crazy.”

“He must have liked whatever the two of you did.”

“We did nothing. You know I would never jeopardize our alliance with Ironbridge.”

Her uncle exhaled. In a quieter voice he said, “Then why did he send this dowry? Why does he insist on a merger with you tomorrow?”

Kamoj felt as if she had stepped into a bizarre skit played out for revelers during a harvest festival. This couldn’t be real. “He wants *what*?”

Maxard motioned at the storeroom. “His stagmen brought it today while I was tying up stalks in the tri-grain field. They spoke as if the arrangement were already made.”

It suddenly became all too clear to Kamoj. Lionstar didn’t want the ruins of an old palace, the trees in their forest, or Photax’s crops.

He wanted Argali. All of it.

Strange though his methods were, they made a grim sort of sense. He had demonstrated superiority in forces; many stagmen served him, over one hundred, far more than Maxard had, more even than Ironbridge. With his damnable “rent” he had established his wealth. He had even laid symbolic claim to her province by living in the Quartz Palace, the ancestral Argali home. Any way they looked at it, he had set himself up as an authority. Today he added the final, albeit unexpected, ingredient—merger bid so far beyond the pale that the combined resources of all the Northern Lands could never best his offer.

“Gods,” Kamoj said. “No wonder Jax is angry.” She set down the light threads, the remnants of her good mood vanishing like a doused candle. “There must be a way I can refuse this.”

“I’ve already asked the temple scholar,” Maxard said. “And I’ve looked through the old codices myself. We’ve found nothing. You know the law. Better the offer or yield.”

She stared at him in disbelief. “I’m not going to marry that crazy man.”

Maxard brushed back the disarrayed locks of his hair, his forehead furrowed with lines that hadn’t been shown anywhere near as much yesterday. “Then he will be within his rights to take Argali by force. That was how it was done, Kamoj, in the time of the sky ships.” He squinted at her. “I’m not sure my stagmen even know how to fight a war. Argali has never had one, at least not that I know about.”

“There must be some way out.”

It was a moment before her uncle answered. Then he spoke with care, as if treading through shards of glass. "The merger could do well for Argali."

Kamoj was sure she must have misheard. "You *want* me to go through with it?"

He spread his hands out from his body. "And what of survival, Governor?"

So. Maxard's words came with sobering force, as he finally spoke aloud what they dealt with implicitly in every discussion about the province. Drought, famine, killing winters, high infant mortality, failing machines no one understood, lost medical knowledge, and overused fields: it all added up to one inescapable fact, the long slow dying of Argali.

The province wouldn't end this Long Year, or next, maybe not even in a century. But their slide into oblivion was relentless. With the Ironbridge merger, they still might struggle, but their chances improved. She and Jax had regularly visited each other to discuss the merger. At worst, Jax would annex her province, making it part of Ironbridge. She would do her best to keep Argali separate, but she did lose it to him, at least her people would have the protection and support of the strongest province on this continent. Although Jax didn't inspire love among his people, he was a good leader who earned loyalty and respect.

And Lionstar? Yes, he had wealth. That said nothing about his ability to lead. For all she knew he would drive her province into famine and ruin.

"Hai, Maxard." She rubbed her hand over her eyes. "I need to think about all this."

He nodded, the tension of the day showing on his face. "Go on upstairs. I'll send a maize-girl to tend you."

She went stiff, understanding his unspoken implication. "Lyode always tends to me."

"I need her elsewhere tonight."

"*You* need her? Or Jax?" When he didn't answer, her pulse surged. "I won't have my people flogged." Kamoj headed toward the door. "If you won't tell him, I will." She dreaded confronting Jax but this time it had to be done.

Maxard grabbed her arm, stopping her. He held up his other hand, a tiny space between his thumb and index finger. "Ironbridge is this close to declaring a rite of battle against us. I've barely thirty stagmen, Kamoj. He has over eighty, all better trained." He dropped her arm. "It would be a massacre. And you know Lyode. She would insist on fighting with them. Will you save Lyode and Gallium from a few lashes so they can die in battle?"

Kamoj shuddered. "Don't say that."

His voice quieted. "With the mood Ironbridge is in now, seeing you will only enrage him. He can't touch you yet, so Gallium and Lyode are the ones he will take out his rage on."

Knowing Maxard was right made it no easier to hear. Kamoj wondered, too, if her uncle realized what else he had just revealed. *He can't touch you yet.* She spoke with difficulty. "And after the merger, when the rages take Ironbridge? Who will pay the price of his anger then?"

Maxard watched her with a strained expression, one that reminded her of the wrenching day he had come to tell her that the village patrol had found the bodies of her parents frozen beneath masses

ice in a late winter storm. She had never forgotten that wounded time of loss.

He spoke now in an aching voice. “Does it occur to you that you might be better off with Lionstar?”

She rubbed her arms as if she were cold. “What have I seen about him to make me think such a thing?”

“Hai, Kami.” He started to reach for her, to offer comfort, but she shook her head. She loved him for his concern, but she feared to accept it. Taking shelter from the pain now would only make her responsibilities that much harder to face when that shelter was gone.

Maxard had caught her off-guard with his insight into her relationship with Jax. Her uncle had always claimed he delayed her merger to give her experience at governing, lest Ironbridge be tempted to take advantage of a child bride. Now she wondered if Maxard had a better idea than he let on about the life she faced with Jax. As an adult she had more emotional resources to deal with Jax’s temper.

But Maxard hadn’t guessed the whole of it. Last year, in Ironbridge, she had enraged Jax when she visited the city outside his fortress without his permission. Nor had that been the first time she bore the brunt of his temper. Most people saw him as the strong, inspired leader who had built Ironbridge into a great power. Kamoj also knew his other side, the Jax who would make Lyode and Gallium pay for defying him. The only difference was that in this case he would have a stagman mete out the punishment rather than taking care of it himself, as he did in private with Kamoj, when he used his hands or riding quirt against her.

In her childhood, he had never touched her in anger, instead using censure or cold silence and reproach behaviors that offended her. But since she had become an adult, his temper had turned physical. She had never told Maxard, knowing it would drive her uncle to break the betrothal no matter what price it cost Argali. She could never set her personal situation before the survival of her people.

Gentle one moment, violent the next, Jax kept her on the edge between love and hatred. She dreaded his rage, savored his wisdom, feared his cruelty, longed for his mercurial tenderness, resented his need to control, and admired his remarkable intellect. But beyond her conflicted emotions, she knew one fact: Argali needed him. Her loyalty and love for her people came first, above all else, including her personal happiness. So she had learned to cope with Jax. The situation wasn’t perfect, but it would *work*. Lionstar threatened that careful balance like a plow tearing up their world.

“Can you talk to Jax?” she asked. “Mollify him? Maybe you can keep him from hurting them.”

“I’ll do what I can.” He watched her, his dark eyes filled with concern. “This will work out, Kami.”

“Yes. It will.” She wished she believed those comforting words.

After she left her uncle, she walked through the house, down halls paneled in tanglebirch, then up to a second floor balcony. At the top of the stairs, she gazed out over the foyer below, treasuring the sight of this home where she had lived all her life—the home she might soon leave. The entrance to the living room arched to the right. A chandelier hung from the room’s ceiling like an inverted rose aglow with candles. It reflected in a polished table, drawing blue scale-gleams from the wood. Ne

the table, a light panel glowed in the wall, the last working one in all the Northern Lands.

Regret and longing for all that her people had lost washed over Kamoj. When that panel failed, thousand new light threads would do no good. Even Opter Sunsmith couldn't fix a broken panel. The knowledge had been lost long ago, even from the Sunsmith line.

Kamoj walked along the balcony to her room. Candlelight filled the chamber, welcoming her. It glowed on the parquet floors, worn furniture, and her old doll collection on the table, which she kept in memory of her mother, who had given her the beloved toys. Her bed stood in a corner, each of its four posts a totem of rose blossoms and fruits, ending at the top with a closed bud.

A voice spoke behind her. "Ev'ning, ma'am."

She turned to see Ixima Ironbridge, a young woman with a smudge of flour on one cheek. Jax had sent the Ironbridge maize-girl to Argali last year, so Kamoj could get to know her. That way, whenever Kamoj traveled to Ironbridge, she would bring a familiar face with her, someone who already knew the province and could help Kamoj feel more at home. The thoughtful gesture had both touched and confused Kamoj. How could Jax be so considerate one moment and so harsh the next?

Ixima spoke in her Ironbridge dialect. "Shall I be a'helpin' you change, ma'am?"

"Thank you." Kamoj sat tiredly on her bed.

Ixima slid off the boot and peeled away the sock. Kamoj winced as the cloth ripped away from her toes. The gouge must have bled and then dried her sock to her skin. Lifting her foot, she saw dirt in the cut. "We better clean it."

The maize-girl tilted her head, considering Kamoj's foot. "I donnee see how a'rubbin' it would help. You rest, hai, ma'am? Tomorrow it be feeling better enough to scrub."

Her lack of knowledge troubled Kamoj. Dirty wounds festered. Nor was Ixima the only person she had known to make mistakes on health matters. She thought of asking the healer in the village about setting up a program to educate people. He was already overworked, and she hated to add to his load, but in the long run this might help ease his burden.

"We must treat it now." Kamoj kept her voice kind so Ixima didn't take it as a rebuke.

The maize girl fetched a bowl of warm water and soap. While she cleaned Kamoj's foot, Kamoj leaned against the bed post, struggling to stay awake. After Ixima helped her prepare for sleep, Kamoj settled in bed. The maize-girl darkened the room and left quietly, leaving one candle flickering on the window sill.

Kamoj lay on her back, her hands behind her head, staring at the ceiling. She would always remember the first time she had met Jax, not long after her parents had died. Tall and powerful, his mail gleaming, his handsome face kind, he had knelt to speak to her, bringing his eyes level with her own. He had seemed like an enchanted hero then, a shining savior come to rescue Argali. Over the years she had learned the truth, that under the hero's exterior burned a complicated, violent man whose clenched need to control contaminated his many good qualities.

If she refused the Lionstar merger, it would placate Jax but break the law. If Argali and Ironbridge combined forces, they could raise an army almost equal to that of Lionstar. But if Lionstar attacked

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