

## Chapter 1

Voice Jin approached the serpent-path, and her words cut through the whistle of the wind.

“Asagi is dead,” she said. A tall woman, she sat high above commoner and warrior alike on her powerful black horse. She did not dismount. Her attention was on Taskmaster Isaan only. The workers, knee deep in drifts and bent against the wind along the serpent-path, were inconsequential. Taskmaster Isaan’s warriors, huddled in their furs around the meagre warmth of a song-light, touched their fists to their foreheads in gestures that went unseen. Voice Jin noted me without looking. Took in the bow. Took in the swords thrust through my belt, one long, one short. But she gave me no acknowledgement at all. I was beneath her notice.

Unseen.

Taskmaster Isaan looked up from his book of philosophy. His eyes narrowed. He grunted once, adjusted his thick, lynx-fur scarf against the bitter air. Flakes of snow drifted between him and the lord’s Voice. He noted the two armoured warriors flanking the lord’s Voice. Pointedly ignored the third man.

“How?” Isaan asked. His eyes turned back to the book, seeking truth in the rows of script.

“You’ll see for yourself,” the Voice said. Flecks of fallen snow speckled the black lacquer of her armour. She was a striking woman, but her eyes were dark as her iron, colder than the winter.

“Now? No,” Isaan said. He gestured towards the diggers. “Work’s not done yet. One hour until sundown. The quota is still behind.”

The Voice looked over towards the struggling labourers. The workers knew that sundown drew near. Their digging had slowed. Their sieving had slowed. Their chatter had slowed and then died away. *Get to the end*, they thought. Maybe it was just that the cold had slowed them. The temperature had dropped again last night.

Their fingers would be feeling the effect. Some would be burning. The sand beneath the snow carried the essence of a god’s passing. It was not for mortal men. The diggers cast glances at Taskmaster Isaan. Waiting for the whistle. Waiting to be told that another day of indentured life was over, that they could walk six miles back to their shacks, to crumple onto frozen sleeping mats. To see their children. Wives. Husbands. They had survived another day. They would kneel before their

little altars, to figurines of uncaring clay, and pray that tomorrow would be the same. Back breaking, but forgiving. They had nothing else.

I was no digger. On the serpent-path, I watched for signs of a serpent about to break cover. Hadn't seen one in a fortnight. Nobody had been dragged screaming into the ground. The gods had blessed us, truly.

"Dig. Dig, or face the whip," Isaan yelled at them. "Either we break an egg's weight, or you keep digging until the sun hits the horizon."

I eased my feet left and right, trying to push feeling back into them without the motion being noticed. I had been standing there since an hour after dawn's first light, when the digging began. My toes had long since gone numb in their shoes, but Taskmaster Isaan had afforded me thick fur lined mittens. I was worthless if I couldn't feel my fingers. Neither Isaan, the Voice or Issan's warriors – if his ragged gang of thugs even deserved that accolade – paid me the slightest bit of attention. It dishonoured them to note my presence. I was invisible to men possessed of honour. A living ghost.

"It will not wait," the Voice said. Her tone was rich and filled with pride and command. The two warriors who accompanied her were splendid in black armour, chased with red. They looked down on Isaan's men with disdain. Isaan's men didn't like it. They were used to being important around these parts. Men who entered the wine-shop and drank on Isaan's account. People got out of their way when they walked down the street. But they were rough around the edges, their armour patched and repaired. Voice Jin's warriors were as far above Isaan's as Isaan's men were above the diggers.

Isaan shrugged.

"I haven't seen that fat fool in years. What do I care if Asagi choked on a crust of bread or poisoned himself eating the wrong kind of eels? It is no business of mine. His heart has been waiting to give out on him for years. The lord's quota is more important."

"Asagi was War-Born," the Voice snapped. She was not intimidated by Isaan, for all that he had once been a swordsman of great reputation. "You need to see for yourself how he died. You will not believe it if you do not."

"I won't?"

"No. I do not believe what I have seen either." She glowered at him. "It is that doubt that drives me to ask your opinion also."

Isaan was a hard man. He'd been born into the warrior-class, and no War-Born lived forty winters without being hard as summer-steel. Hard, but disciplined. He showed no outward sign of surprise. He picked up the scales to weigh the shimmering pile of silvery dust that the diggers had managed to sift from the earth. Not an egg's weight. Not by a bow shot. The lord would not be pleased. But then, Lord Tashaan seldom was. Isaan weighed his options.

I scanned the excavated sand, which even now was filling with falling snow. The diggers had been working that stretch of sand all week. All month, even, as the winter snows blew in and turned the land to white. The sand-drift was running dry of the scale. Another couple of days and Isaan would give up on this stretch of red dirt and move on. He would look for another sift where the scale was rich, and the essence was gentle enough for them to bear.

Nothing moved within sand or snow. It never moved, not until it was too late. I'd been watching over the diggers since Isaan was assigned the serpent-path, three weeks of growing cold. The other five men standing guard wore fine armour, their swords gilded, their helmets horned and crested with the three moons. I had no armour to wear. My winter robes were ragged and frayed, the swords through my belt plain and unadorned. Scavenged.

The Voice waited patiently.

"Who killed Asagi?" Isaan asked eventually.

"This is what we must see," the Voice told him. "Come."

"A serpent is most likely to come now, with dusk falling," Isaan countered. "It cannot wait?"

To disrupt the day's digging was not done. Nothing was more important than the quota. One egg's worth of dust a day. Since Isaan had brought me, we had never stopped before the sun set. The Voice looked them over.

"Let them dig on. They have your men to protect them still." She said the word with contempt. It was evident how little value she placed on Isaan's men. He was only one of a dozen gang leaders employed to dig the scale along the serpent-path. To the people of the village, he was somebody. A man of importance. To Voice Jin, he was just a retired warrior grubbing out a living.

"I need to be here if a serpent comes," Isaan snapped. "We're stretched as it is."

"It is a risk that I will take," she said.

"And my men?"

“Warriors fight and die and it is their glory that drives their lives. Death is not important. Only that they fight is important. You should remember that, Isaan. You are still War-Born under all that dirt and snow, are you not?”

The Voice’s challenge was a cold one. Isaan brushed flecks of snow from the vellum pages of his book, wrapped it in a stretch of embroidered silk. Stowed it in his pack. He rose slowly, turning to face her. His left hand moved to the twin swords he wore through his belt. No speed, but a gesture filled with threat. He kept his right hand very still. Her insult lingered in the air. Isaan was not a man to try lightly even in his fifties, even with the damage that the arrow had done to his shoulder. The Voice must have known that. But then, there is a death-lust in all great masters of the sword. They question, they wonder, who will it be that brings me down? And in that desire to know, they rush headlong towards it.

Pride simmered in the air like steam.

But Isaan had given up his warrior days to retire here, on the edge of nowhere. His glory was faded, and now he sat on the edge of the serpent-path, overseeing diggers as they cut flecks of scale from the dirt.

Isaan flicked a hand at me without looking to say that I should accompany him. It would have been beneath his dignity to speak to me. Or look at me.

“You. Come,” Isaan said. He meant me.

“You’re bringing your Unseen?” the Voice said. She hadn’t looked at me directly, but she’d identified me at the edge of her vision. Noted the brand upon my cheek that marked me out. It would have sullied her eyes to look on me directly.

“He has seen his share of death,” Isaan said. He did not look at me.

Were I tradesman or merchant class, I would have bowed my head and looked to the ground. Were I of the lowly labourer class, I would have gone to my knees before addressing a servant of the lord. Had I been liked the diggers, indentured, I would have pressed my face to the snow and covered my head as I spoke. But I was none of these. I was Unseen. It would have dishonoured them if I showed any such deference at all, and so I kept my eyes tracking across the silent snow.

“What were you, before you were nothing?” the Voice demanded.

“I was assistant to a song-doctor, before the troubles,” I said.

“Do you sing?”

“No. I was just an assistant.”

“And yet you wear swords,” she said. I shrugged.

“A wise man wears swords in these dark times.”

“Asagi has no need of a doctor,” the Voice snapped, her attention back to Isaan.

“I will bring who I bring,” Isaan said.

Isaan and the Voice stared at each other. Hatred flowed between them. Perhaps one had killed the other’s uncle in a duel. Perhaps Voice Jin had knocked over a cup of salt on Isaan’s table. Perhaps they had been lovers. It did not take much provocation for the War-Born to bring one another to blades. She shook her head. Spat. But we moved.

I was glad to be moving. The blood returned to my feet.

I had no horse, so I ran along behind them. We crossed the six miles, leaving the edge of the serpent-path and into the trees. The trees stark and leafless, boughs heavy with snow. They wept trails of bright sap, red and blue against grey bark. Hoof-tracks had frozen over in the mud. Voice Jin led, her back to Isaan. It was an insult, but a small one. They were of equal standing. They should have ridden side by side, with the other warriors ranking up behind them in order of their family’s wealth and status.

It did not matter where I went in the order. As Unseen, I had no status at all. No place in the class hierarchy that dominated the empire. I was as invisible to them as a dream. Had I walked at the front of the procession or interposed myself into their midst, it would have been beneath their honour to have spoken to me. To even acknowledge their existence. Of course, had I touched them, or their animals, or their food, they would have been within their rights to draw steel and strike off my head, and nobody would have said much of anything about it. It was easier to avoid offending anyone if I walked at the back, and so that is where I walked. I wore my bow over one shoulder, the quiver of arrows slung on my belt. My feet hurt as the feeling returned to them, but that was nothing new.

The forest was beautiful. There is beauty to be seen in the world. It is all around us, if we choose to find it. I learned that from someone very wise, but it was hard to remember it when the blood was burning its way back into my toes. I sought it. I found it.

I had not known Asagi personally, but the name was known around Santo Village. He had been War-Born, warrior-class, but had given in to gluttony and there was no suit of armour made for a man of his size. He was cruel, but all War-Born seem cruel to those below them. He was charged with keeping his supply routes clear of robbers. He had done a good enough job of that. The forest road held more than a few bones still held to the trees with rusting nails. The forest scavengers had taken the rest of those unfortunates.

We left the forest, coming onto the meadow-downs, broad sweeps of grassland a few miles south of Shathran Castle. The meadow was gently sloped, snow rising to the horse's knees. Asagi's resting place was clear enough, the red against the white.

Horse tracks studded the snow, not yet filled. Voice Jin and her men had circled the violent epicentre, the scarlet-sprayed circle. They had not disturbed it.

The snow had soaked through my shoes, the wool padding inside them, the stockings beneath. My feet were wet, and cold. I let none of that show on my face. Who would have cared?

"Asagi," Isaan said, frowning. His brow, already lined by his fifty years, lined further. "Kahiro," he said, which was the name I had offered, "Take my horse."

I took the reins when offered, careful not to touch his gloved hand. Isaan was not a hard master, but that didn't mean that he would tolerate impropriety. Isaan may have fallen far from the status his birth had granted him, but he still had his pride.

"Go. Look," Isaan said. I nodded, though he would not look at me directly anyway, and approached.

Asagi was dead. There was no doubt about that. There was a reason that Voice Jin had come to Isaan for his expertise and not the surgeon, the physician, or Lord Tashaan's clutch of herbologists.

The closest piece of War-Born Asagi was his head. He stared upwards, thick, frozen blue lips held in a moment of shock. The second piece was composed of most of the right side of the torso, cut neatly from shoulder to hip. The remaining, decapitated piece - arm, waist, legs - lay a little further. His sword lay a foot from his curled blue fingers.

"Someone cut him into pieces," I said. "A swordsman."

"Your Unseen proves indispensable, Isaan," Voice Jin said. She welcomed my presence now. Having brought me was an error on Isaan's part, though he could not have known.

Some of the snow around Asagi had already been cleared by Voice Jin and her men, though more had fallen. A black rope had been laid in a wide circle, twenty five feet across. A dozen raw-cut winter branches had been driven along the rope's edge, glyphs cut whitely against the dark bark. Isaan stopped and studied them, frowned.

"Do you know what this signifies, Unseen?" Voice Jin asked.

I looked at the sticks. Shook my head. She grunted.

"Hm," Isaan said. I got out of his way and stood silent as he entered the patch of flattened snow. He frowned, but he didn't say anything further.

This bothers him, I thought. I had seen death before. I had met Isaan in the border wars of the inner provinces. Asagi was just another dead man. His innards had spilled out, but the gentle covering of snow accumulating over them had drawn away their colour. They had lain there for some hours. Isaan picked up the head, examined the edges of the severed neck.

"One cut," he said.

Voice Jin watched him, silently. Said nothing. For a Voice, she wasn't talkative. Nobody but Isaan had approached the body.

Isaan moved to the second piece, knelt and examined it. Moved on to the last. He scowled, nodded to himself. Looked at the pink stains in the snow where blood had sprayed from the wounds. He backed up a few paces. Stood, thinking. Slowly his hand moved to the hilt of the longer of his two swords. He drew the blade in a silent sweep of bright silver-steel. Raised it above his head. He cut forward, suddenly and violently, a stroke from the right falling low to the left, then brought the blade up rapidly, horizontal, throat level. Nodded to himself.

"That was how it was done," he said. He looked down at the fallen pieces of human meat around him.

"You're certain?" Voice Jin said. "A stroke-of-wrath, and a stroke-of-the-wolf before the body could fall?"

"Yes," Isaan said. He looked across the dismembered remains as though he couldn't be sure, but his voice was firm. "The first blow struck Asagi in the shoulder. Cut clean through his bones. His ribs. His spine. It left him at the hip. Before he could fall, his killer followed with the wolf-stroke. Straight to the neck. His head fell away clean in that moment."

“A duel between War-Born,” Voice Jin said. It was not a question. She scanned the carved sticks, the rope.

“A duel,” Isaan agreed. “Asagi knew the man he was meeting here.”

“Or woman,” Jin said.

“Yes. Or woman,” Isaan said. “They were War-Born. Asagi would never have duelled anyone beneath him. And the strokes that killed him...” He struggled to admit it. “The warrior who struck fast enough to do this – he was a master. I have only ever once seen a man who was capable of striking this way. In such time. With such precision.”

“Who?” Jin snapped.

“The abbot of Ten Moon monastery,” Isaan said. “And Lord Tashaan killed him twenty years ago. I know of none alive that could have done this.”

“You could not?” A challenge. We were close to Santo Village, which owed its allegiance to Lord Tashaan, but which Isaan governed in all but name. Asagi was far from home, killed in a War-Born duel. Voice Jin’s suspicions had fallen close to home.

“Never,” he admitted, and the words were grudging. “Not even at my best.” He looked up at the Voice. “Could you?” Voice Jin ignored the question.

No, I thought. None of you could. Not Isaan, not Voice Jin, not even the lord’s champion was so great a master of the sword as to have done this.

“It seems hard to believe that Asagi would have duelled anyone at all,” Voice Jin said.

“He was War-Born,” Isaan said, grim. “He had his honour. He came out here, to this place in the snow, to settle a grievance. How many War-Born are there in Shathran Castle?”

“Twenty-six,” Voice Jin said.

“Then test them, and you’ll have your killer,” Isaan said. He sheathed his sword, expertly, silently. Back when he was young, he had been feared. He should have died ten years ago at the height of his art. No warrior should live forever. Written in the bloody snow he saw the truth of that described in plainest terms. Whoever had killed Asagi was far beyond him in skill.

Which was true, of course.

And by the time spring came to bring the thaw, I’d send the rest of them to join him.