

CHAPTER 1

FOUR BLUSTERY DAYS HAD PASSED SINCE the beginning of the battle. Locked for several hours a day inside her little chamber and often pacing restlessly about, Princess Mersabel had spent much of the time waiting for news.

Furthermore, the previous night she had been disturbed by a terrible dream in which she saw a soldier running up a hill, calling out to the King, "The Kontas, my Lord; they have joined forces with the Gimiras to fight against us."

"That cannot be true," came the reaction from the hilltop, "you are out of your mind."

"I am sober and tell the truth, my Lord. I have seen them with my own eyes. The ungrateful savages are devouring the horsemen of Kaffa!"

The messenger approached the King, gasping for air.

"I also saw Defar the Courageous fall," he added after a moment of deliberation.

The King released a painful sigh.

"The savages attacked him with javelins from all sides."

"What about the boy; have you seen the boy?"

"No, my Lord, I have not seen the young man," was the reply, "only Defar the Courageous I saw fall."

Meanwhile, an unruly battle was raging below in the valley.

"Jaya, where are you my son?" the King called out with all his strength, his voice reverberating throughout the valley.

The valley was filled with great tumult and confusion.

Warriors stumbled and fell and were trampled on by horses as well as retreating soldiers. Many of those retreating were trapped by the deadly and unrelenting arrows of enemy archers from behind.

“Jaya, my son, can you hear me?”

There was no answer.

With this scene echoing in her mind and soaked with sweat, Princess Mersabel had woken up.

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Since then, she had not stopped replaying the damned dream in her mind despite her desperate and repeated attempts to forget it. All her attempts to occupy herself with something uplifting, something cheerful, were to no avail.

“Soon the King will return and find me actually doing nothing,” she reproached herself.

She had to recite the *Song of Solomon* before the King and his outstanding warriors when they returned from the battle.

“You must show the King the fruits of your labor,” Temari, her tutor, had exhorted her before departing with the King and his men. “The King yearns to see his children prove themselves worthy of their position, that they may be revered on the basis of merit rather than of birthright alone.”

Unless she was able to recite the story well, she had been warned, she would be confined to Bonga for the whole of the harvest season. That meant she would not be able to travel to Anderaccha and Sharada with the Adal and his men later that month.

The Adal was a tall, sturdily-built merchant, with long, braided hair soaked in oil. He, along with his substantial caravan, would come up twice a year from a land faraway, crossing three long rivers, to sell the King salt, clothes, fine ceramics, and many other luxury commodities that were not

found in the lands southwest of Shewa. Occasionally he also sold rifles, swords, and combat knives, but these were exceptional items, as the kings of Shewa and Jimma had forbidden the transaction of such items with Kaffa. In exchange, the Adal would buy ivory, slaves, gold, civet oil, hot spices, and coffee.

The merchants would arrive in Bonga in the harvest season, when the sun was pleasant during the daytime and the evening air was cool, the wind gentle, and the sky clear, inviting one to stay outside. Wherever they stayed, most evenings they would go out into the open to make a campfire. While the fire burned, they would sit around it and tell each other stories. The King's children were allowed to travel with them as long as the Adal and his men were in Kaffa. This was also the time for the children to enjoy riding camels.

The Adal knew many stories about people beyond the great floundering sea, people who were unknown to all but a few in the land of Kaffa. He knew stories about great kings and caliphates; about large ships and mighty men who fought battles in Persia; about the nomads of Phoenicia who travelled with extensive caravans, dwelling in the open desert and pondering the infinite stars above them, like his own people.

He was a calm man with a marvelous command of the Highlanders' tongue and could tell long and complex battle stories with extraordinary cadence. His little eyes, even when they laughed merrily, remained watchful at all times, becoming exceptionally bright when the story was about Saladin the Great or Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi, who had conquered the Highlanders of the north.

But today, Princess Mersabel did not care either for the Adal or for his stories. Her mind was filled with battle scenes

and sounds of agony.

“Oh, please, let them return safely,” she uttered, anxiously walking up and down the chamber.

Nevertheless, something told her that this particular battle was different from, and much more ominous than, all the battles the King had ever engaged in.

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It was not her first experience of the King going into battle. Nor was this battle a very great one, or so the King had reassured her before leaving. But from the time she had heard of the King’s decision, her mind had been uneasy. Then had come the dream, the impression of which, instead of waning, was growing in intensity as the hours went by. Now she felt faint and her palms were palpitating.

“Four long days!” she sighed, in despair. “Why aren’t they back yet? I wish there was something I could do!”

Weary and impatient, she kept on glancing out of the window, hoping to hear the sound of returning hoofs and the familiar voices of men. It was late afternoon, and, in the distance, she could hear the mooing of cows as they hurried back to their calves, as well as the melancholic flutes and songs of shepherds returning home. Occasionally the wind blew hard, shaking the fading mango leaves from their trees.

“I cannot concentrate on reciting a story,” she told herself defiantly. “I’m very afraid!”

In her mind persisted the imagined battle scenes and cries, the aggressive shouts of brutal savages forcing their victims to surrender, and the groans of fallen warriors in throes of death, begging to be finished off.

Everything around her seemed to spin. She feared and anticipated the sudden outbreak of a terrible misfortune that would soon engulf the kingdom of Kaffa, with no exemption

of her or her household. She wanted to leave her chamber and the residential quarters, but she was not allowed. If she must, she had to take an escort of the Royal Guard with her. No child of the King was allowed to go anywhere without the company of guards.

But this time she wanted to be alone, and she wanted to be outside. She wanted to be at the Warka Tree and connect her soul with the spirits of her ancestors.

The spirits! They had not been showing favor towards her of late, she feared. Nor had she been at ease with them. Yet, it was not her desire to desist from seeking their favor. She needed their help desperately.

She slipped out surreptitiously to the Warka Tree, through the mango orchard. A cold September wind whipped her face and harshly whispered in her ears. The mango orchard was still wet from the morning rain. She walked in a hurry as her body trembled ceaselessly. When she arrived at the Warka Tree, the stench of blood and butter and incense from sacrifices offered a week ago was still strong. She considered it a good omen and hoped that the spirits had not forgotten the devotion and worship they had been offered.

As she prepared to supplicate, however, she discovered that she was too agitated. She tried hard to compose herself and to concentrate, but she was not successful. Her mind was full of thoughts and images. Even without the distractions of the battle and the bad dream, her mind was rebellious whenever she wished to connect her soul with the spirits, or recite a story.

"A woman's mind is not capable of concentrating on anything for a long time," she had heard Temari saying again and again.

"Be good and concentrate, Mersabel," she pleaded with herself. "There's no way of telling to whom the victory of a

battle belongs. It may only take the death of one worthy knight to bring it to an end. Foresight and valor are in the hands of the spirits and they can give them to whomever they please. The spirits make everything happen. The King and his men have been lucky in the past, but who can take luck for granted?"

Often it was easier for her to think about the spirits, about the likelihood of their existence, rather than to actually connect with them. Whenever she tried to connect with them, thoughts would begin to pour through her mind, and her mind would be willing to accommodate them, working against her will, raising countless and overwhelming questions, questions regarding the capacity of the spirits to be rational and just. Now, question after question cluttered her mind and overpowered her before she could form a single sentence. She felt guilty and angry with herself. Her mouth tasted bitter and her lips were dry.

The struggle to discipline her mind was an everyday experience and she was accustomed to defeat. And the spirits never seemed to help or care. This was despite her frequent attempts to placate them through acts of charity, meekness, and a fervent desire to be and do good. But today was different. The disturbing dream made the prospect of defeat unbearable, and yet the gates leading to the spirits' dwelling place were hidden as always.

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Her mother maintained that the spirits disturbed the princess's thoughts deliberately, "knowing her divided mind" and "the insincerity of her supplication". Her mother knew many things about the spirits. Even the knowledgeable Temari did not dare to refute this fact. She could read palms and the dregs of coffee lying in the bottom of cups, and in this

way, tell people their fortunes. More often than not, her predictions were accurate. Only recently she had predicted that one of her maids would lose a sister-in-law in childbirth and, indeed, it came to pass four days later, after the maid had given birth to a healthy girl. The woman died despite the midwife's claim that the delivery had been successful and without any complications.

When Princess Mersabel thought of her mother and her closeness to the spirits and of the nature of the revelations they generously shared with her, she could not help wondering whether their apparent assertion of power was not in fact an act of aggression rather than mercy. Her mother asserted that the spirits showed kindness to saints, and yet, she did not know a more wicked person in the entire kingdom than her own mother. How could the spirits fail to recognize this simple fact, a fact which was so obvious to almost everyone?

Still, Princess Mersabel could not ignore the spirits. More than that, she was frightened of them because she thought them cruel. They drank too much blood. If the people forgot or were unable to give them their butter and incense and blood, and the fat of sheep and bulls and goats, they would send heavy rain and terrifying thunder and smite the land with plagues. Many people were afraid of the spirits. The horsemen of the King and his noblemen trembled whenever they made sacrifices and carried out rituals. The proud Temari often cried and wailed when he prayed before his God. The fearless Adal often lowered his voice and cast down his eyes when he spoke of his Allah.

"All fear their gods," she murmured to herself, "only they don't admit their fear because they are pretentious."

In Kaffa, the ancestral spirits reigned over different domains. Some were responsible for bringing the rain on time and for blessing the earth with fertility; some for protecting the King and his kingdom; some for protecting the people from untimely death and diseases; and one of the spirits, a female spirit, for blessing the women with sturdy and healthy children.

The spirits protecting the King and his kingdom were known as the Spirits of the Warriors. These were majestic and powerful spirits who rarely meddled in the everyday affairs of the common people. They were approached by the King and his warriors with the utmost reverence and with the sacrifice of bulls and rams whenever a war, a plague, or a natural disaster loomed in the land. By contrast, the spirits of the common people were intimate and approachable. The people owed to them the great blessing they enjoyed in their land. But these spirits were also contentious, fiercely jealous, and excitable. The one quality they shared in common was chastisement. One of these spirits, *Atete*, was the most dreaded and the most sacrificed to spirit in the kingdom of Kaffa, for she was believed to have the power to open and close wombs, both of humans and of animals. If she was displeased with the people, she would smite the land with plagues. Immoderate and embittered women often sacrificed to her, begging her to punish their adversary with unspeakable afflictions, fully persuaded that *Atete* would, indeed, swiftly respond to their request.

Princess Mersabel secretly detested *Atete*, for she gave sons to mothers whom she loved, but made it a sign of disfavor to give daughters to mothers with whom she was not well pleased. If she was entirely displeased with a woman, she would give no children at all.

Princess Mersabel would have settled for Temari's God

who was lofty and regarded all men as his creation and detested polygamy. But, despite his admirable qualities, he seemed to exercise no apparent influence on the character of her tutor whom she knew to be at once selfish and vindictive.

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Suddenly, she heard the sound of hoofs, quick and uneven. She jumped to her feet in panic. It was getting dark without her realizing it. Under cover of the mango trees, she advanced cautiously in the direction of the noise. It was unlikely that enemy invaders had penetrated the palace compound without first fighting a bloody battle. There were royal guards stationed at the two main gates and at the two watchtowers, watching and protecting the palace compound day and night. Down the hill, and throughout the town, there were also town patrols. All would have to be overcome before the palace compound was besieged and conquered. In spite of this knowledge, Princess Mersabel was uneasy and on her guard.

The sound of galloping horses grew ever louder. Through the mango trees the princess endeavored to observe the passing riders, presumably on their way to the courtyard. They were the King's men, all right. About fifteen of them, followed by the horse of her uncle, the Commander of the Royal Guard. She could not make out his face perfectly, but from his erect posture and stout upper body she could determine that it was he. His horse was throttling at ease, the reins held loosely. A short while later, the horse of Temari appeared, followed by a pack horse, then the King's horse, and many others; but where was her brother?

Cautiously, but hastily, she followed them through the trees as they headed towards the assembly hall, which was the first building opposite the north gate, after the courtyard.

Biting her lips, she kept pressing on towards the middle gate of the mango orchard, fixing her eyes on the pack horse. The King's horsemen were not so few in number as to have come from a defeat, nor were they jubilant to have achieved victory. The manner of their arrival made it impossible to ascertain anything.

They all stopped in front of the assembly hall. The King and her uncle jumped off their horses quickly and headed towards the pack horse. All the others alighted their horses and waited with great solemnity.

"Not a good sign," Princess Mersabel murmured to herself anxiously.

The load was removed from the horse and placed on the ground. A minute or two passed in silence and stillness. Then four royal guards stepped forward, lifted the load with great care and carried it slowly towards the assembly hall. The King and her uncle followed them. The King appeared confused, as if he had lost all orientation of the place. She knew at once it was her brother's body, wrapped in a hide, that the guards were carrying. Her body shivered uncontrollably. At last, the earth vanished beneath her unsteady feet, and she, too, sank into a dark and bottomless emptiness.