

Snow

Hathawa Cheong shuddered silently, her head pressed against Antinua's naked breasts. Hathawa wasn't crying anymore, just shaking as she came down from the intensity of the experience. Antinua could feel the body pressed against her slowly releasing, relaxing, unused to freedom. Red marks on Hathawa's wrists must still burn from the rough ropes that had held them spread and her legs still moved stiffly from being held immobile too long. Her neck still drooped with the heavy collar, cold steel pressing against Antinua's chest. The collar was the only piece of clothing between the two of them. Antinua ran her finger over it fondly.

She murmured reassurance, her words muffled in her lover's long hair. The words weren't important, only the loving embrace, tender counterpoint to the brutal force she'd displayed earlier as Hathawa spun helpless in the air, suspended, blind, uncertain where the next blow would fall.

"I got... I got a letter today."

Antinua put a hand on each cheek and turned Hathawa's head so they could see each other. It was rare for Hathawa to speak so soon. She usually needed longer, until morning even, before she could express herself with words again. Antinua waited for her to go on, prompting her with a kiss to the forehead.

"From my parents. They want me to come home. I've... I've said no before, but school's out now and I can't..." She touched the cool metal around her neck, leaving unspoken the difficulties it would present. She'd been a virgin when she arrived in Vaillia, until Antinua's possession of her. Hathawa didn't talk about her family much, and Antinua didn't pry. From what little she knew, they were wealthy and traditional. They treasured their pure, shy, innocent only child, and wouldn't be happy to find out she'd been working in a brothel. Weren't happy, Antinua corrected herself. Of course Hathawa had been watched.

"I have the key. You could take it off."

Antinua knew from the tensing beneath her hands that she shouldn't have suggested it. She kneaded at bare shoulders, pulled Hathawa's head back to her chest in a protective hug.

"Just an option. I'll go with you. How long until school starts again?"

"Three weeks." Hathawa snuggled in closer, the tips of her long hair tickling

Antinua's crotch.

“One week travel, a week there, one back. I'll find a ship tomorrow.”

“They sent a courier vessel. It's waiting in the harbor.”

“Are you ready to get up now? I need to pack if we want to leave tomorrow.”

Antinua was impressed. Hathawa never wanted for money, she knew, but a whole ship just for her? That was beyond her wildest imagination. Wasteful. Had she snared a princess?

Hathawa leaning down, rubbing her cheek slowly against Antinua's stomach. That was fine too. They could stay here a while longer.

“Mind your balance there, girl,” One of the sailors called over to Hathawa as she leaned against the rail. “You fall overboard now, no telling how long it would take us to fish you out.” Sea spray occasionally crested the side of the ship, blowing through her hair and chilling her face. She barely felt the cold. This was nothing compared to winters back home, frozen biting wind and scratching particles of ice too bitter to be called snow. Somewhere ahead where the cutter swiftly carried her lay a forest and a castle. Home. But It wasn't really home anymore - it had her mother and her father and the room she grew up in, the courtyards she'd played in as a child, but home was behind her, in Vailia, the small room she shared with Antinua. Her bed on the floor was seldom used. She usually slept in her mistress' arms. There, or with a stranger downstairs when she sold her body.

Antinua liked that, Hathawa knew. She liked haggling with customers over how much they had to pay for a night with her slut while Hathawa stood to one side blushing and trying to cover herself. Antinua was seldom more flushed and eager than when Hathawa dripped cum as she begged for permission to cum herself. A small heat grew in her stomach and on her cheeks even now thinking about some of the things she'd been made to say and do.

“That's water, in case you're wondering.” She hadn't heard Antinua come up behind her, distracted by her own thoughts. Strong arms pressed into her from behind, holding her against the rail. One of Antinua's hands rested beside hers -

only a little larger, but calloused and whip-cord muscled. Hathawa had seen her kill with those hands, knew they could rip through stone powered by some inhuman strength and magic. She felt safer in their presence than anywhere else.

“Read it to me.” Antinua brought a scroll into view, holding Hathawa pressed against the rail with her body. Below green water surged, threatening another wave to rise up and soak it.

“I... ok.” Hathawa squirmed around so she faced inward to shield the paper from saltwater spray. Antinua gave her some space as she lifted the scroll to read. It was a brief history of the Cheong family, stamped with the seal of the university. Antinua must have asked for help to find it. The mercenary had never learned how to do more than write her own name.

Hathawa summarized rather than reading directly, eyes skipping down the page to make sure she didn't leave out anything important. Her father, the Cheong family head, was a direct male-line descendant of the first emperor. Though they were no longer rulers he retained some of the majesty and much of the money. He was a strict man, but fair, and like all heads of household in her homeland, gave up his first name when he ascended to power. Their fortune came from... She trailed off, realizing Antinua's attention had drifted. The mercenary was staring into the distance, seeming lost in her own thoughts. She looked so... Hathawa didn't have words for it. The view of a small woman transposed against the vastness of the sea and sky might suggest fragility, but it didn't. It inspired awe. Tough and strong, Antinua might stand firm and steady while the whole world bent and twisted around her.

“What is it?” Hathawa asked.

“There is no point in hiding. Your parents must already know everything. What will your father do about the collar?”

“I... I don't know.”

“Guess.”

“They might... they'll decide I'm not going back to school. Back to Vailia.”

“Do you want to?”

“Of course I do!”

“Will you defy them?”

“I don't...”

Antinua put her hands on Hathawa's cheeks, holding her head up so she had no choice but to meet her mistress' eyes. After a long searching moment, Antinua shook her head and released Hathawa from her gaze.

“Don't worry. I'll take care of it.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I said don't worry about it.” There was a sharp edge in Antinua's tone she didn't usually take with her. Hathawa began worrying. “You're taking Maiden's Tea now that we're not in Vailia anymore, right? No pregnancy risk?”

Hathawa blushed and looked away nodding, certain where the conversation was headed now that Antinua had that certain evil grin.

“That sailor who talked to you earlier. I want you to sleep with him tonight. Offer to pay him for the pleasure.”

Cold. That was Antinua's first impression of Hathawa's home, and an enduring one. She touched her hand to the railing, drew back from the chill wood. This was too far south, a barren, frozen wasteland of ice and snow, nothing like Vailia's perennially temperate climate or her own burning sands.

It wasn't exactly fair to call the city a frozen wasteland, with its busy port and crowded streets, but as far as she was concerned any place that had even a light dusting of snow on the ground before Descending Wood deserved the title. Antinua pulled the heavy fur coat closer, wondering how Hathawa could be smiling. She held Antinua's hand and pointed out sights excitedly, rosy cheeks and good cheer opposing Antinua's dour mood.

The city was a strange one, built of wood and stone, but brightly painted in contrast to the dull grey sky. Towers rose above the city in the distance, bright red and gold, while even the poorest fishmonger's home huddled around the port had whitewash splashed over the wood and some form of decoration painted on the street side. Festive decorations to make up for the dreary weather, Antinua decided as Hathawa explained that every building also had a second set of doors on the second story, kept locked until snow piled up high enough to block the ground entrance.

A carriage waited for them at the docks, and with a parting bow the captain turned them over to the coachman's care. Hathawa's smile evaporated when she saw the servant's livery – grey and dull green. Antinua understood once she saw a family house crest stitched magnificently across his back. A reminder of what waited for them. If there was anything represented in the crest Antinua couldn't see it, only sinuous green ribbons twisting in the wind.

Hathawa said nothing more as the door closed and the driver whipped the horses into motion. Antinua wasn't inclined to force a conversation either, preferring her own thoughts. She watched the city, trying to get a feel for the layout. The streets were more impressive to her eyes than the distant towers, paved with broad flat stones, each a dozen feet across and joined snugly to its neighbors. She wondered how such huge stones had been moved into place, and who had spent such massive effort to provide carriages with a smooth ride.

Up, out of the city and up into the surrounding hills the carriage took them. The city ended almost abruptly, buildings and paved roads giving way to pine forest and dirt. No sign of logging – where did they get their wood, Antinua wondered – and no sign of anyone making their home among the trees.

“Just another mile,” Hathawa ventured quietly. They rounded a corner and began to climb more sharply.

“Is the forest dangerous?”

“Not if you're invited. The family lands are... protected.” Heavy silence returned, broken only by horses and wheels and creaking wood. Rounding a final corner, Antinua saw what must have been their destination. Two grey stone towers marked the forward corners of an enclosing stone wall. Unlike the city, this hidden enclave was unpainted, grey stone matching the clothing of the servants who opened the heavy wooden gate as the carriage approached. Antinua shivered. Rubbing her hands together was no help against the pervasive cold.

Inside the gate was a large courtyard, paved with the same gigantic smoothed stones as the city roads. Almost empty, except for a fountain flanked by two tall pines in the middle and a small party waiting for them to one side. Hathawa was tense sitting across from her, craning her neck to get a view of the party without exposing herself. Antinua reached across and petted her cheek. Cold, like their surroundings. She pulled the fur around her neck further up, hiding

the steel collar still locked there for a few minutes longer. The carriage came to a stop. The coachman hurried to open the door and offer a hand.

Antinua stepped out first, ignoring the hand. She stood straight, surveying those gathered to meet her lover. She wasn't physically imposing, but the sword that hung at her side lent a certain weight to her regard. Lady Cheong – a stern looking woman, matching Antinua in presence and exceeding her in height. Lord Cheong – a slender man with a vaguely effeminate face but calculating eyes. Three others Antinua ignored – one of them had a sword, but didn't feel very dangerous. He might be skilled by most standards, but not hers. She stepped aside and Hathawa emerged from the coach.

“Hathawa dear. You didn't tell us you were bringing a friend.” She and her mother stepped forward to embrace and kiss each other's cheeks formally.

“This is Antinua. She... she's...”

“Antinua Vanyavanadar, at your service. It has been my honor to guard your daughter on her journey home.” She bowed from the waist, surveying reactions without seeming to move her eyes. Hathawa – relieved. Lady – guarded. Lord – curious. He couldn't possibly have recognized the name, but the lilting cadence would put an educated man in mind of the northern deserts.

“Thank you. Has the trip become dangerous since we last passed that way?” Behind the mother's innocent sounding question was a hint of disapproval. “I'm sorry, I'm being ungracious.” She stepped back into the group to allow Lord Cheong to greet his daughter. The same formal hug and cheek kiss. Then he held her at arms length, examining her. Searching.

“Please, come in. Let's not keep dinner waiting. Set another place for our guest.” Cheong gave a thin smile to Antinua as he herded his daughter away.

The bulk of the residence was buried in the mountainside. Hathawa handed her jacket to a waiting servant, but Antinua shook her head and kept hers on. The bulk of stone overhead kept the worst of the cold out, but also sucked up every trace of heat that fires or bodies could provide. The constant chill would wear on Antinua, if rubbing her hands together to warm them after even this brief jaunt

outside was any indication, and they wouldn't be able to share a room to keep each other warm. Perhaps she should tell one of the servants. Antinua would be too proud to ask on her own behalf. Hathawa wrenched her attention back to the present before that train of thought showed on her face. If the servant who took her coat noted her collar, he said nothing. It wasn't his place. Her parents walked in front without looking back. She could put off an explanation for just a few more minutes...

"What are you doing wearing that thing, girl?" Hathawa nearly jumped as her old nurse Bretta whispered in her ear. Of course it wouldn't escape her sharp eyed watch, and having raised Hathawa from a baby, no sense of formality bound her to stay silent.

"It's... it's hers." Hathawa looked at Antinua, walking a pace and a half ahead, a safe distance. If her sharp ears picked up the whispered conversation, she gave no hint. That silenced the nurse for a long moment.

"I warned your parents about that city, I did. Told them something like this would happen." Hathawa could feel her shaking her head as she fell back the traditional two paces for a servant.

It was only a few short steps from the entrance to the dining hall. It was much as she remembered from her childhood. The same crystal chandelier lit the room in a thousand tiny refractions, the same high-backed chairs lined the seats. This room had varied in only minor details for ten generations. It would not change in the mere year and a half she'd been gone, however different she herself felt.

There was one change. When she'd left, she'd been seated halfway down the right-hand side of the table - child. Now she was now seated at her father's right hand. Heir. Antinua took her place a seat further down, on the other side - honored but unknown guest, placing the master of the guard between her and the head of the table. Traditions as ancient as the room, from when the land was wild and each stranger a threat. Antinua might not understand the subtleties playing out around them, but her seat next to the only other armed guest she'd understand. Hathawa felt rusty, out of practice.

"Eat." Her father commanded, the table remaining silent as two dozen people each took a single slice of hard bread and a single cup of thin soup,

dipping and chewing without conversation. Traditions again. This one from the ancient past, when taking more meant someone at the table went hungry. Not all dinners at her house were this formal, but many were - practice, for when she'd needed to perform flawlessly for other guests or to honor some occasion.

"Serve." Hard bread dispensed, they could now dig into the real meal. Spiced duck and bread white enough to be mistaken for snow, potatoes and beet soup with beef. Antinua helped herself with gusto. Hathawa took only a cut of meat, and picked at it nervously with her fork, waiting the inevitable questioning. She didn't have to wait long, only until her mother had eaten a couple bites to satisfy herself everything was sufficiently excellent to serve on such an occasion.

"What is that you're wearing, dear? It looks like..."

"Tell us of the university," her father interrupted. That was very unlike the man of her memory, distant and slow moving as the mountainside. Her mother was equally surprised, and bit back an immediate reply.

"It's, um, it's good. The library is even larger than you saw. There's an entire back room open only to the professors. I'm top of the class in mathematics and astronomy. I like professor Zimmer."

"Good. Is there anything we can send back with you? A servant or a carriage? Do you need money?"

She shook her head. She tried to take a swallow of wine, but could barely force it past the lump in her throat. He shouldn't have asked about money. That wasn't right. The longer this drew out the harder it became, until she could barely speak. Hathawa felt sick, reached up to touch the collar around her neck but stopped her hand before it drew any more attention to the ornament. Antinua was watching, listening, unmoved by the guardmaster's attempts to engage her in conversation. Hathawa wanted to ignore everything else and run over, hide in her arms until this all just went away. But it wasn't going to.

"Good, good. And do you need a locksmith, or do you have the key with you? I try to keep an open mind to fashions from abroad, but it looks like a slave collar to me. I'd prefer not to see my daughter wearing it at home."

"I... I don't want... it... it's in my baggage." She struggled for breath, grasping at the first lie that came to hand. Her father's attempt to set her at ease with talk of her interests hadn't worked at all.

“Good. Don't worry, it will be fine for dinner.”

Hathawa huddled over her plate, willing the rest of the world to just disappear. She could feel her parents sharing glances over her. She tried to loosen the twisted knot in her stomach with a bite of ash-tasting duck. She felt eyes watching, judging, Bretta and her father and the servants...

“This place is so different than my home,” Antinua's voice broke through the shroud of misery. No one was looking at her, and they never had been. All eyes were focused on the mercenary loudly drawing attention. “You have snow well covered, but leave the soup to us. Give me an afternoon at the market to buy ingredients and you'll be spoiled on anything else for the rest of your life.”

“That's because you won't be able to *taste* anything for the rest of your life,” Brenda spoke up. “Burn your taste buds completely numb. I've had the stuff you're talking about, and when my mouth stopping being on fire, I couldn't taste anything sweet for a week.”

“Only a week? Who'd you get it from? He must have given you the mild stuff,” Antinua teased back. The knot loosened. Hathawa could breath again.

Night filled the residence. Not just darkness and the ever-present cold, but the feeling of weary sleep. Antinua had kept the attention focused on herself throughout dinner – exotic barbarian was enough to keep people watching, with the subtle support of the lord of the house. She didn't understand it. Hathawa had expected immediate opposition from both parents, but their presence at the dinner had been oddly subdued.

Antinua saw firelight dancing under the door in front of her – still awake. It opened smoothly under her touch. No reason to bar the door in their own house. The lord and lady sat facing the fireplace, both reading silently. The lord would have looked up at her entrance, had she not *pressed* ever so mildly against his mind. She closed the door behind her just as softly. Sticking to the shadows and making no sound on the luxurious carpet, they didn't notice her presence until she emerged from the shadows near the mantel, a steely eyed ghost materializing out of thin air. Lord Cheong glanced in surprise and the window, still barred, and the

door still closed. His wife looked ready to scream, but held her voice when Antinua knelt in front of them. She unbuckled her sword and laid it at the lord's feet.

"How did you enter? There should be two guards at the door."

"I did them no harm. I mean you none either." She declined to elaborate further on the subject. "We should talk."

"Yes, I believe we should." Silence stretched for a long moment until Antinua finally began.

"She is my beloved. My *tanavadi-madar*." The word meant nothing more than beloved-woman in her native language, but she hoped the foreign sound would make them stop and think rather than simply react. Playing the barbarian again. "I have pledged my life to her. Your daughter will come to no harm in my care."

"In your 'care,'" the lady snarled. "What did you do to her?"

"I said 'I love you.'"

"And do you?" The lord asked quietly.

"I do. Please tell her the same."

"That we love her? She knows."

"Of course she does." Antinua pulled from her pocket a steel key, and laid it alongside her sword at their feet. She bowed, pressing her forehead against the carpet in front of each of them in turn. "But please tell her. I have crossed the ocean, come into your house and supplicated myself at your feet because she needs something I cannot give. Please tell her you love her."

"I have granted many petitions in my years as the head of house, for wealth, power, vengeance and death, and denied many more. Yours is at once the smallest favor and the most difficult." The lord closed his eyes, massaged his face trying to release some of the tension. His voice grew slow, pained. He turned to his wife, but she looked away with a proud and hurt expression. "I will have a horse made ready for you in the morning. Stay in the Blue Wheel inn. We will send for you." Antinua bowed again, stood, buckled the sword back around her waist. She padded back to the door, leaving without stealth. The two guards were back at their posts and jumped to their feet as she exited, but a waved gesture from the lord made them relax.

The halls seemed darker, colder than before as she navigated them now. No

one had told her the way, but a couple of educated guesses later she found herself at the door to Hathawa's room. Only one guard here.

“I would speak with her.”

“I'm sorry my lady, but she is sleeping and not to be disturbed.” Antinua was in no mood to be patient, to slip past undetected or use subtle tricks as she had before. A measured and soundless blow to the temple caused him to stagger back, mouth opening to call out. Thick skull. She hit him again and he collapsed in place. The brief violence improved her mood a little. But only a little. She opened the door quietly and slipped inside.

“Antinua?” Hathawa was sitting up in bed, blanket clutched to her chest for warmth and rubbing her eyes. The light came from a banked fire, red coals giving the scene a warm glow. Antinua sat on the bed, twisting to face the young woman.

“Take off the collar.”

“What? I... no...” She clutched at the physical reminder of the happiness she'd found, other hand seeking out her lover's. Antinua took her slender hand between her two strong ones and pressed a key into it, twin to the one she'd given the lord.

“You will always be mine. You don't need a piece of metal to prove it. Be brave. Do as I say.” She pressed Hathawa's hand against her chest, then leaned in to kiss her forehead. Hathawa's hand trailed after her as she stood and slipped out out of the room.

The lighter band around her neck where the collar used to sit was hardly noticeable to the eyes. Hathawa shifted the mirror closer, but her skin was pale enough that there was no mark to be seen. That felt wrong. Putting it on had changed her life too much for it to leave no impression. She'd never known what she was missing until she'd found it.

Antinua was right. It was just a piece of metal. She could rely on Antinua, lean on her strength and shelter in her presence without a physical reminder. No need to rub her parents' face in the fact that she had given up her freedom.

Hathawa shivered, set the mirror down, set the collar down with the key still in the lock, walked away.

Breakfast was a subdued affair. Her mother avoided looking at her as she sat down, her father made no comment on the missing piece of ornamentation as he handed her a basket of rolls, then asked what jam she would prefer. Hathawa herself said nothing not required by courtesy. Antinua wasn't there. They ate a few bites in silence.

"The emperor sends his regards, and asks if you can attend the midwinter ball with us. You must to leave in a week though, correct?"

She nodded to her father. The emperor was rumored to be a kindly man, but she'd only ever seen him once up close, when her parents presented her on her tenth birthday. He'd smiled but not spoken to her directly, dealing exclusively with her parents.

"We will visit the Quannongs for supper in three days. I will write ahead to tell them you will not be wearing red." Red – seeking marriage, courtship. She knew the Quannongs quite well. Their son was a bit pushy, but quite handsome, and would have been a good match to carry the Cheong name. She nodded again.

"Would you like to visit the Tower? I hear the clouds will clear tomorrow night, and I know how much you love the stars..."

"Oh just stop it, you heartless beast of a man!" Her mother slammed her palms into the table. "Hathawa dear. Did she force you to wear that thing?"

Hathawa could only shake her head silently, suddenly fearful. She wished she could hold Antinua's hand, draw strength from her presence...

"The bruises on your arms, did she do that to you? Don't pretend they're not there, I see the way you rub them."

A nod. She couldn't even think of lying under so direct a question.

"She beats you?"

"No!" It came out more as an uncertain shout than firm denial. How could she explain what it was like, that this was love and not abuse? Hathawa wanted to cry and argue and run away all at the same time. She managed only to stare back with half-defiant eyes. She couldn't see straight. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"But you love her. And she loves you. And you take money to expose

yourself like a common... like a... I don't understand." Her mother slumped back in her chair, the questioning, angry intensity draining from her voice. She ran a hand over her face. "I don't understand."

Cheong drew breath to speak, but the lady held up a hand to stop him. She wasn't done yet.

"I love you Hathawa. I love you and I hate her and never want to see you hurt. I don't understand. I... I am trying to believe you, you've always been so clever and honest, but I don't. How can she hurt you and sell you and love you at the same time?"

Her father looked between the two women, uncertainty written across his face. A long moment of silence enshrined the room. Hathawa clenched her hands together under her chin and looking miserably at her plate, waiting to hear what he would say.

"I... I will not have a grandchild I do not know the father of." He seemed on the verge of saying something else, but shook his head as though to clear it of weakness. His voice was strained as he went on. "You may not marry her or bind yourself legally. *No children*. In... in all else you may do as you see fit."

Relief flooded through Hathawa like a tide, washing everything loose and finally emerging as a flood of choked tears. She slid off her chair onto her knees before him, grabbed his hand, kissed the back of it. She couldn't bear to look at her mother, drained of vitality and sunk into her seat. On unsteady knees Hathawa rose and fled the room, eyes blurring and face burning, no destination in mind except to get away. Too much. Too much dissolving fear at her father's words leaving an unfilled void, too much shame for making her mother cry.

She ran, choosing paths at random and pushing aside doors until a blast of freezing air and a flurry of snow brought her back to her senses. She was on a balcony, storm of swirling snow blocking all sight beyond a few feet. The edge of the stone platform seemed the edge of the world, buffeting white blasts of wind pressing her back against the wall. Hathawa raised an arm to protect her eyes. Stinging cold would have driven Antinua back inside in an instant, but physical pain was a welcome distraction from everything else, biting chill across her bare face, cold pressing through thin fabric to block out memory and thought.

Bretta waited inside, pressing the heavy door closed against the blizzard

when Hathawa finally stumbled back through. Her old nurse brushed away melting snow, rubbed a towel through her wet hair, pressed a cup of hot tea into her freezing hands. Bretta had been her confidant for many years, her closest and perhaps only friend. The silent care needed no explanation, more comforting than mere words.

Bretta led her back to her room, sat her down in an armchair, stoked the fire and stood behind Hathawa to brush away the snarls inflicted by the towel. Hathawa pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged them. She felt... she didn't feel anything. That was good. The cold wind had burned out any remaining shred of emotion. Empty. She'd fill up again later. For now empty was nice.

"Where's Antinua?" Hathawa finally ventured the question that had been on her mind for three days. Bretta hadn't known, nor any of the servants, so finally she resorted to asking her parents.

"Staying in the city." Her father adjusted the cushion, trying to find a comfortable way to sit in the bouncing carriage. The road away from the Quannongs' estate was not as well maintained as their own or those in the city. "I will have her return tomorrow," he relented as Hathawa tried to make up her mind on whether or not to say something more on the subject. Her mother frowned, but did not object.

The Quannong castle was still visible in the distance behind them, similar in style to their own. Blank stone walls around a central courtyard set into a mountainside. The courtyard had been cleared for an outdoor dinner – less formal than she'd expected, friendly. Their youngest son had been much as she'd remembered him, though not quite as interesting. Handsome became a harder scale to climb as her exposure grew.

No one really knew who had constructed the buildings originally – the First Emperor, some claimed, while others opined that they were remnants of an earlier people that the Emperor had driven out. All Hathawa knew for certain was that they were very old, and that every noble house had one – it was the definition of nobility, in fact. The Quannongs had bought their rank only a hundred years ago,

when the previous family could no longer maintain their status. It would take decades more to repair the toll a century of neglect and failing fortunes had taken on the roads.

“Hathawa, what...” her father started, stopped himself. “I do not have a second child. Do you still understand what that means?” He gripped her mother's hand, a pained look crossing her face.

Hathawa nodded. She was the heir. The only possible one. If she had a a sibling she could abdicate, could pass on the responsibility. Inheritance only flowed downwards, never up. An uncle could not take her place, nor a cousin. If she died before having a child, the Cheong family would *end*. Castle sold by the city to a new family, servants dismissed, name turned to dust. A thousand years of history dead and gone.

“You have a few years left. Finish your schooling. Enjoy yourself. The university in Vailia is filled with many fine and powerful young men. If you have not found someone to continue the family by the time you return I will arrange a marriage for you.”

Hathawa clenched her hands together, stared down at her lap. She nodded. It was the way it had to be. Cheong was giving her as much freedom as her was able. She should be happy about that.

“Must you sell yourself?” Her mother's tone was pained, pleading. “Can you at least stop that?”

“I... could...” Hathawa couldn't meet her eyes.

“But you're no going to. I don't understand.” She shook her head and lapsed back into silence, staring out the window at the passing landscape.

A flicker of resentment passed through Hathawa's mind. She had never *asked* her mother to understand, had done her best to stay quiet and private. They'd spied on her. She had never *asked* to go to Vailia in the first place. That too had been decided for her. Antinua would have done something, would have spoken up. Hathawa couldn't. Her anger died the same silent death as every other time she'd tried to express herself in front of her father and mother.

“Tell me of the war in the north, Hathawa. Vailia is almost directly between the two nations, correct?”

She nodded.

“Good, good. I have been considering expanding some business in that direction, and would appreciate any insight you have on the matter.”

Everyone accepted the distraction. Nothing was resolved. The carriage rolled on.

Antinua ran her hands over Hathawa's bare shoulders, pulling the fragile young woman against her. She pressed her lips into Hathawa's hair and breathed in, smelling ocean and snow and beauty. They were sleeping together, nothing more. Hathawa hadn't seemed interested when Antinua nibbled on her ear, and she had been just as happy to let the idea drop. Her heart wasn't really in it either, despite a week's enforced chastity on them both.

“Hath...”

“Mhm” Her lover shifted, opened half awake eyes and snuggled in closer.

“Did they ask you to leave me?” Though she wanted to stay strong, to act as though she'd never doubted, she couldn't muster the energy to keep the uncertainty from her voice.

“Mmph,” Hathawa closed her eyes again and relaxed back down into complete slumber.

Antinua kissed the rich brown hair in front of her and watched the ceiling. Wooden planks, lit only by moonlight through a tiny porthole. Hathawa hadn't heard the question, wouldn't remember it in the morning. That was probably for the best. She tried to let the rolling of the ship lull her back to sleep. Had anything really changed? She'd been so sure when they left, that Hathawa's parents would see reason, would support their daughter, that they really loved her.

She was no longer so certain. Nothing was resolved. The ship sailed on.