

ANJI KILLS A KING

SHE KILLED FOR A CAUSE.
WILL SHE DIE FOR IT TOO?

EVAN
LEIKAM



"A STUNNING DEBUT . . .
RELENTLESS TILL THE END."
—GLEN COOK

ANJI KILLS A KING



EVAN LEIKAM

The Rising Tide

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For my mother, Angela

THE MENAGERIE

The Hawk: Sword master. Wears a mask of black metal.

The Goat: Navigator, Maxia. Wears a mask of blue stone.

The Ox: Muscle, second in command. Wears a mask of wood.

The Lynx: Scout, sharpshooter. Wears a mask of jade.

The Bear: Leader. Wears a mask of white ceramic.

THE MENAGERIE TENETS

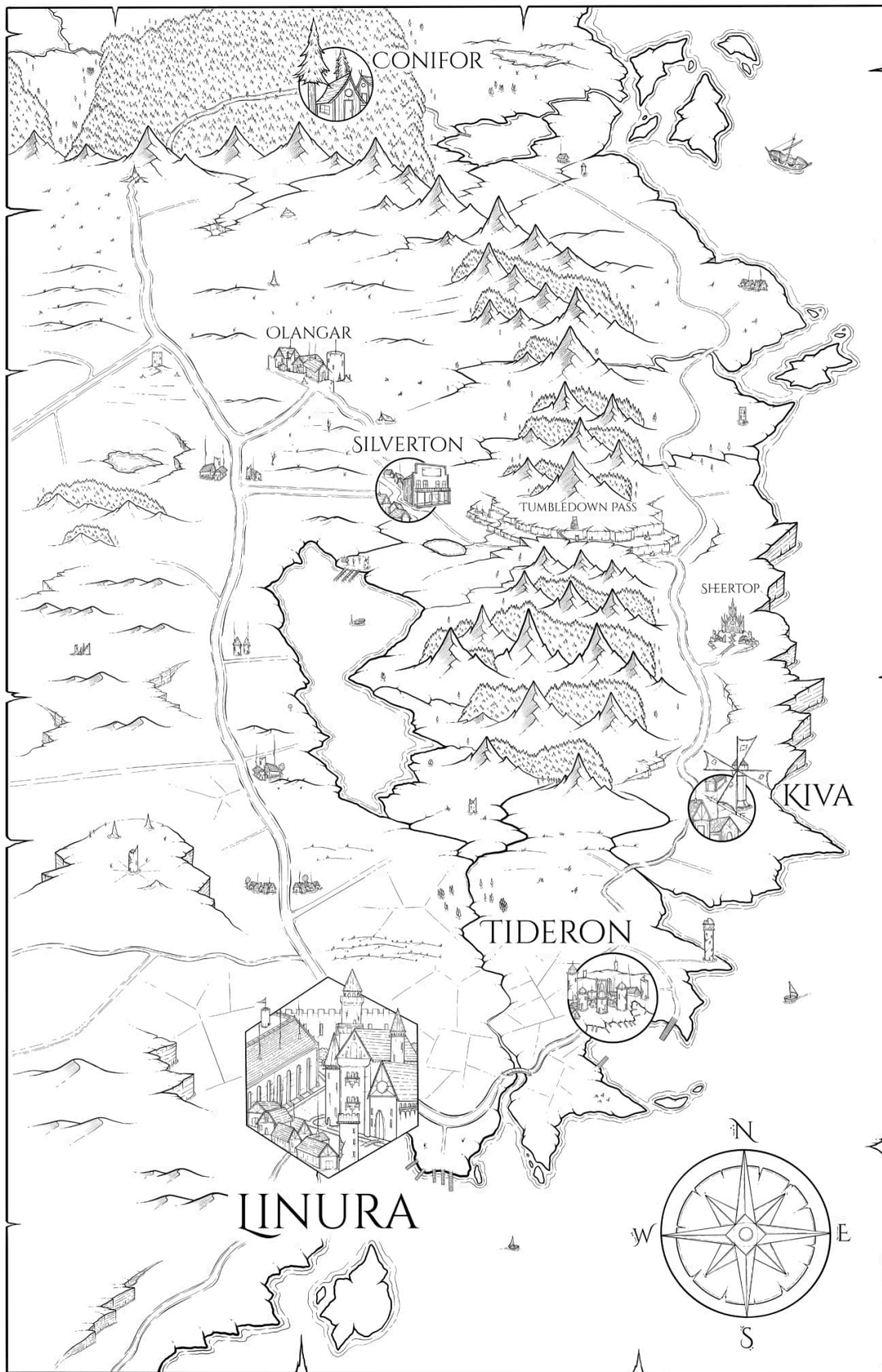
Let no charge learn your face.

Let no charge learn your name.

Let no crime be announced before trial.

Let no lie befoul your lips.

Let no other take your charge.



Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves.

—CONFUCIUS

PROLOGUE

Hot noble blood pumped over Anji's hand. She clapped the other to his mouth and held it tight as he convulsed like a fish pulled from the sea, his bare feet squeaking against the marble floor. A fresh surge of crimson caked her fingers as she dug the knife deeper into the hot ruin of his neck and forced him to lie flat. He gurgled and groaned, his thrashing tongue soaking her palm with spit.

His gray eyes met hers, wide and confused.

"Shut up, please, shut *up*," she hissed, stepping aside at an awkward angle to avoid the still-gushing blood. There was so *much* of it.

His chest finally stilled. His eyes grew distant. Fingers trembling, Anji wrenched the blade free and stuffed it under the mattress. She snatched a silken sheet from the ocean of bedding and bundled it around her blood-smeared arm. Then she took a final look at his lifeless form under the open window and allowed herself a silent, satisfied breath. Up so high, the air was clear, free from the reek of the city streets below.

The guards outside paid her an indifferent glance as the doors clicked shut at her back. She scurried on her way, hoping her eyes weren't too wide, grateful for the baggy trousers hiding her shaking knees. A terrified squeak bubbled in her throat, but she swallowed it down and took the carpeted stairs one at a time, her unbloodied hand clutching at the polished railing. Her vision tunneled as she descended.

She was sure she would faint, that she'd tumble down the steps and wake the entire castle.

The landing was empty, the corridors dead to either side. She ignored the pulse pounding in her ears and stole through the entrance hall, past the ballroom's double doors, and into a narrow servants' passage. Not a soul passed as she ducked behind a tapestry hiding the stairs to the basement where laundresses were kept.

Kaia and Libby and all the others were asleep. Angry snores issued from Matron's quarters.

Anji stepped lightly between the cots, past her own, then down a short hall and into the washroom. A latticed window cast half-moon light onto the toilets, the sinks, the beaten-copper basin. She dumped the length of silk into the tub and dunked her stained hand into a pail of clean water.

She scrubbed in silence. Her mouth felt stuffed with cotton. Fingers clumsy and cold. Her breaths were clipped and rapid chokes. The low light made it difficult to tell if she'd removed all the blood. She held up her hand in the moon's pale glow. Blood was still caked under her nails, but she'd rubbed her hand raw. It would have to do.

She snuck back into the sleeping chamber to her cot. Underneath was a box she'd never opened in front of Kaia and Libby—certainly not Matron. She eased it across the stone floor, lifted it, and set it on the thin sheets above. Inside were a thick bronze coin, a dagger in a leather sheath, and a clutch of silver Celdia pieces she'd managed to stow away, the hollow iron rings looped to a length of frayed rope.

The Celdia jingled as she pocketed it. She clutched it tight, staring around the darkened room, but the other laundresses didn't stir. Matron's snores droned on. A steady thread of air escaped Anji's lips and she turned, grabbed her father's coat from its peg, and said a silent goodbye to her friends as she slipped out the door.

The catacombs were an ancient maze, lit by sconces throwing flickering orange light to the dirt floor. Her breaths echoed off the rock walls, each scuff of her shoes like a hammer blow she swore the whole castle could hear.

Pale, barred light appeared down the passage, and a tension released in her throat. She hurried forward, clutching her coat tight. The grate opened

on oiled hinges onto an empty cobbled path. The sky had eased into the cloud-dusted pink of early morning.

Linura's city streets began their new-day bustle as she walked. It didn't take long to find a wagon, even less so to convince its owner to let her on. She dropped a few Celdia into the old man's callused hand and climbed in between bulging canvas bags. The cart rattled through the main gate, past a pair of constables leaning on their halberds. Anji watched the road lengthen as the wagon took her up the Roseway, blinking at the sun climbing higher over the city's receding rooftops, shining red on the sea beyond the docks. Linura Castle's thin spires dwindled as the bells began to ring.

Anji clutched her dagger's hilt with cold fingers, felt her coin buzzing against her thigh. She settled against one of the canvas bags and a turnip tumbled into her lap. It was filthy, but she took a bite, smiling as she chewed.

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Anji was shitfaced, and likely about to get stabbed.

She'd made it two days on foot in the pounding wind and snow with an empty stomach and piss frozen to her shins by the time she'd found the town—whatever it was called. The old farmer had kicked her out of his cart after a day of travel, all for eating a few turnips. Bitter old fuck. Walking through the barren tundra had reduced her feet to stubby blocks of ice, numb and cumbersome and swollen in her ragged shoes. She'd thrown up the moss she'd eaten.

The town had sat in darkness as she'd approached—dead apart from a scattering of lit windows and a fat column of smoke rising from the thatched roof of a two-story building just off the main road. There'd been a sign swinging on rusted hinges over the building's front door. A faded relief of a burly blacksmith, hammer raised high in one hand, beer stein in the other.

THE HAMMERED SMITH.

Four days past—before she'd become a murderer—she'd have heeded her father's wisdom and avoided bars altogether. They were haunts for thieves and drug fiends, mercenaries for hire. The low places for downtrodden upstarts.

Hell, she'd thought, I'll fit right in.

Regardless, by the time she'd stumbled up the main thoroughfare of this ramshackle village, lips flaking, fingers frozen to brittle twigs, she'd been too exhausted to care. She'd clattered into the cavernous space, ignoring a poster depicting a hazy likeness to the girl she'd once been tacked to the door. She hadn't even stopped to check the bounty.

Now she sat sweating and drunk and hating the inside of this bar more than the road she'd crawled down to get inside. She hated the shriveled bartender and the sickly way he rubbed his hands together as he puttered around the tables. She hated the ceaseless wind outside, clapping the tavern's shutters against the brick. She hated the rotten, pestilent stench of mushrooms pervading every crack and pore of this town. She hated the huge framed poster hanging over the mantel depicting a dark, gangly creature she'd never seen. The shape seemed to shift slightly, its bony shoulders rising and falling, its ugly face contorted in a snarl. Above the moving image, bold letters proclaimed:

**HELP DESTROY THE DREDGER MENACE
REPORT ANY SIGHTING TO A CONSTABLE**

Most of all, she hated the incessant gurgling grunts issuing from the man opposite her as he shuffled and shuffled and threw Celdia onto the table's center. Made her want to pop his fucking eyeballs out.

Four, five.

Anji pressed her fingers tighter to the cards. An old deck with chipped, greasy edges. Smoke hung rank in the stuffy air, stinging at her eyes, creeping through the rafters, into the long-silent kitchen behind the bar. She scratched at her cheek, adding a layer of filth to the blood still caked underneath her nails.

I could afford a bath after this hand, she thought, blinking at the blurry duo opposite with cards held before them, at the grungy sod staring her down. *Should probably buy one for him too.*

Best not count your fish before pulling in the net, sprout.

More fatherly wisdom. She pictured him hunched over their little table, varnished deck in hand, in the quiet hours after her mother had gone to bed. His mischievous grin as he taught her how to count cards—strictly academic, of course. Her mother would never have approved. Anji pulled her coat tighter despite the sweltering fire. The sharp scent of boiled leather racked her nose and her breath came a bit easier.

“Final draw,” the grungy sod said. “Come on, boy, you in or out?”

Anji narrowed her eyes, feigning confusion—mostly feigning. Her hand twitched to her rough-shorn hair, but she stilled it. Somewhere along her mad dash north she’d gotten the bright idea to shave her head to look more like a stableboy and less like the girl who’d shoved a letter opener through a king’s throat, though without a mirror she couldn’t be sure if the change would be enough to fool anyone searching for her. She seemed to have gotten lucky with the Hammered Smith’s few patrons, all of whom appeared well past even Anji’s state of drunkenness, but she’d nearly corrected the man calling her a boy. The word floated to her lips, but she caught it like an eel in her fingers.

Keep it together, Anji.

She set a hand to the rim of her mug, to the handle, brought its lip to her mouth. The beer tasted flat and bitter, nothing like the clear spirits she’d grown accustomed to in the laundry. She pictured Kaia passing her a bottle, an ever-present lock of blond hair dangling over her eye. Libby giggling on her cot, the three of them nursing sore heads and sharp words from Matron in the early hours before their shifts. Anji doubted she’d see them ever again. Her bottom lip twitched at the thought, the loss like a weight settling deep in her chest.

Here in the tavern, her drinking had started in seclusion. She’d polished off three mugs of cloudy beer like they’d save her from the Senate’s headsman, then had the audacity to look into her coat pocket. Empty save for a stray button and eleven measly Celdia—enough for a few more drinks, perhaps, but Conifor was still days away on foot. She needed more money. Gulping down beer on an empty stomach, wondering what she would do,

she'd been on the edge of tears when the man in the seat across from her now had begun shuffling cards. She couldn't help herself. She'd had to do *something*.

Seven, eight ... no, nine ...

"Piss drunk," the man said, dragging on a greasy cigar. He stabbed a pudgy, dirt-stained finger at her mug. "How can someone with so much booze in them win this often, eh?" He exhaled a blue plume of smoke and barked out a sticky cough.

"Ale's got nothing to do with it, Jom," said the wispy, middle-aged woman to Anji's right. "Hot streaks come and go."

Jom wrinkled his bulbous nose. "Hot streaks," he murmured.

Anji darted a glance at the deck, counting as best she could despite the fuzzy cloud nestled where her brain had been. She did a quick mental dance, keeping her face still, and tossed two Celdia into the pile. She rubbed a thumb at the heavy circle of bronze pulsing in her pocket. The tension in her shoulders eased.

The chair groaned as she sat back and sipped at her mug. The thought that she really should stop drinking made an appearance, but was quickly dismissed. The buzz felt nice, and though this man Jom had a murderous look in his eye, there was no chance he suspected her.

Eleven, twelve ... right, and the next one ... Suns?

Jom flipped a card off the deck: Suns. The woman cursed and threw her cards facedown onto the scarred wood. Her scuffed brass earrings shook as she slumped back in her seat, arms crossed. She clicked her tongue and snapped bony fingers at the barkeep. "I think it'll be a nightcap for me and I'll be getting home," she said, still glowering at her hand.

"Not alone you won't," Jom grunted, glassy eyes still on his cards.

"I hardly need an escort." The woman sniffed as the barkeep ambled over and lowered a foamy mug to the table. He'd feigned disinterest for the duration of their play, seeing to other customers and checking in on the trio now and then. Now, with the denizens of this poor excuse for a town turned in for the night, he seemed more inclined to watch.

“You might listen to him, Tela,” said the barkeep, his wattled chin bobbing up and down. “Dark times to be wandering the streets by yourself.” He stuffed the tray under one arm and glanced at the latticed window. “Quite literally dark.”

Jom exhaled another plume of smoke. “Roff still hasn’t turned up?”

The barkeep shook his head.

The woman, Tela, furrowed her brow. “The lamplighter?”

“Not seen in days,” said the barkeep. “And Alma Woodward came in yesterday raving about a Dredger prowling about, keeping to the shadows.”

Tela gaped. “You don’t think Roff...”

“The change comes on fast,” said the barkeep, picking at his chin. “Man has no wife, no family to speak of. Lonely sort of life. Nine know folk are struggling enough these days with what little they have, and he didn’t have much.”

“But even so, resorting to snorting that awful stuff,” the woman’s eyes widened, “knowing what becomes of you. I’ll never understand it. Then again, lamp lighting isn’t much work, is it? He should have found himself more to keep his hands busy.” She sighed. “That’s the trouble with young people these days. Laziness. This will happen when you don’t have a proper job.”

“And no telling the damage a Dredger will do,” said the bartender, frowning. “I hear they’ll dig right through cobblestone looking for Rail. More places for my taxes to go.”

Anji flicked her eyes briefly from her cards to the pair as Jom screwed up his face in concentration. He dragged at his cigar, the exhaled smoke sailing straight into Anji’s nose. She breathed in the fume and wished she had the stomach to ask for one of her own. Somehow looking at Jom she didn’t think he’d offer.

Jom dropped two of his own coins into the pile, metal clinking. He slid another card off the deck (Ravens) and slipped it into his hand, glowering at Anji as she glanced once more to the pair.

Tela wrinkled her nose. “Vermin,” she said. “The whole lot should be rounded up.”

“Shut it, you two,” grumbled Jom. “Trying to think here.”

A shutter outside slapped against the window and the woman jumped in her seat, one hand to her chest. She raked her fingers through graying wisps of hair. “Darkness and drugs and everything in between,” she said, eyes fixed on the window and the black streets beyond. “Plague in Kardisa. And now King Rolandrian murdered in his bed.”

Anji bit her lip and made a show of rearranging her cards as the two spoke.

“I say the old ruin had it coming,” said the barkeep, and Anji’s earlier distaste for the man ebbed a little. “Rolandrian’s legacy will be letting Governors fatten like pigs off our hard work. This tavern has been in my family for six generations, left to me by my father, who would rise out of his grave just to die again if he heard the rates I’m paying—for a place owned outright, mind you.”

Jom huffed a heavy sigh through his nose, but the barkeep rambled on.

“I’ve had next to no custom now everyone is working triple shifts out in the fields. All that strain on the crops—it’ll bleed the ground dry. Anyone of an age to drink is too exhausted to do anything but go straight to bed after work. On top of that, they’re terrified of the new constables—Sun Warden tax collectors in all but name if you ask me. Trussed up in yellow, tacking up their *decrees* and handing out pamphlets, accusing *us* of impiety with one hand while they drain our pockets with the other. Last night two of them came in and told me to hang that up.” He dipped his head to the poster over the mantel. “Wouldn’t leave until they were satisfied it couldn’t be ripped down. Then the pictures and words started moving and about scared the whole bar out into the street. Hardly anyone’s been back since.” He glanced out the window again. “All this muster and bluster and maxia, and for what? So they can carve up a little more for themselves when they’ve already got the world.” He snorted. “I’ve got half a mind to pack up and join the Tide.”

“All talk,” said Tela, waving a hand. “That’s as much a revolution as this bar is a brewery.”

“Rumor is it’s growing in strength,” said the barkeep, but his voice trailed off into a mutter.

Tela rolled her eyes. “I’ll join when I’ve got more than mushrooms and potatoes on my plate.”

“King’s dead, isn’t he?” said the barkeep. “It’s a start is all I’m saying.”

“Would’ve gutted the bastard myself if I’d had the chance,” said Jom. “Nine, if the girl were here I’d buy her a drink.”

Anji allowed herself the tiniest smirk and took a sip of her ale.

Tela scoffed, “Of all the taverns in the world, I doubt she’d choose this one. Most the realm couldn’t find us on a—”

Jom pounded his fist on the table, nearly toppling Anji out of her chair. The pile of Celdia rattled and a few discarded cards flipped over to show their stained faces.

“Dammit, boy, you going to bet or not?”

Tela put a soothing hand on Jom’s shoulder. “Jom, dear, really.”

The tavern rang with silence. Anji’s stomach churned, her hand twitching toward her dagger, but Jom relaxed into his seat, waving Tela’s hand away. “Streak like this, he might’ve figured out the rules by now.” Then he guffawed and pointed a swollen finger at Anji. “You scare pretty easy, don’t you? Gap-toothed little shit.”

Anji took a steadying breath and hunched once again over her cards. “Waiting for a card, *dealer*.”

Jom stared across the table, his beady eyes bright, but flung a card across to Anji and leaned forward, cigar dangling from his bulbous lips. “Speaking of traveling alone,” he said, “where was it you came from, boy?”

Anji’s heart fluttered.

“Silverton,” she said, fitting the new card into her hand. “And it’s your call.” She gripped the table’s edge to keep the world from spinning. Tela gulped her drink, a dribble of amber liquid beading onto her rough-spun shirt. She wiped it off and gave Jom a sidelong glance. Was that tension in