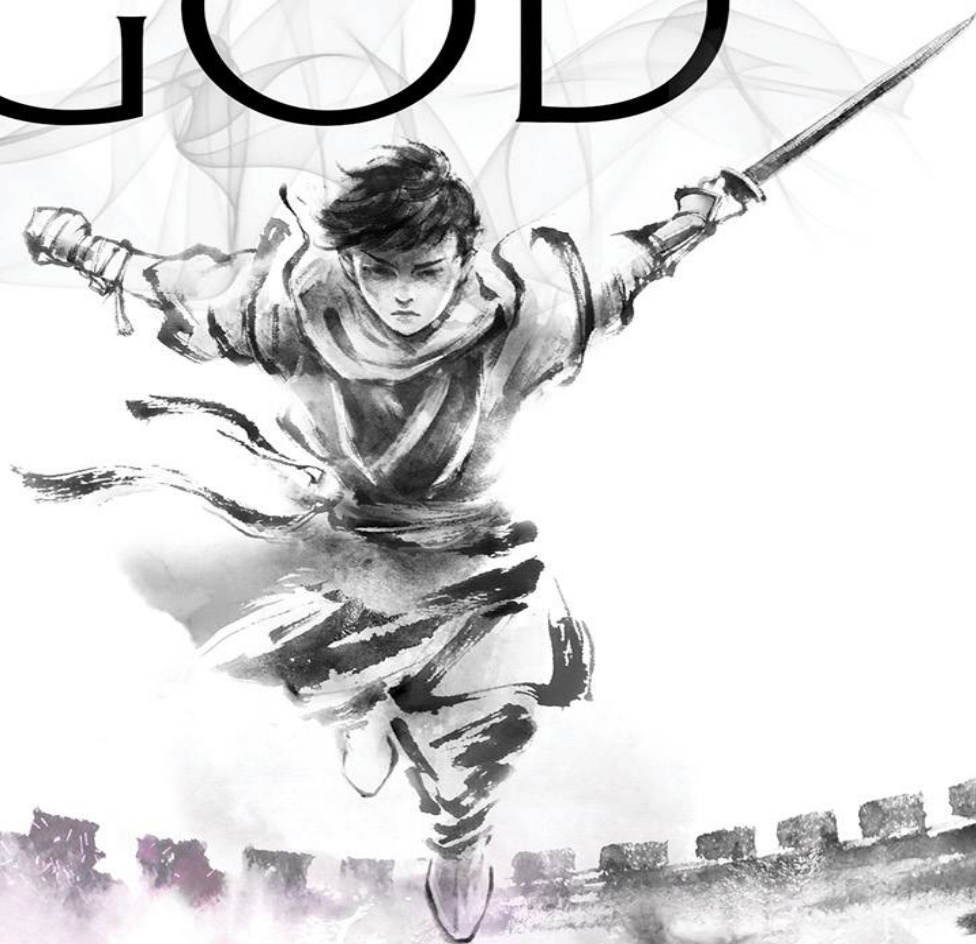


THE BURNING GOD

Who rules
in a kingdom
aflame?

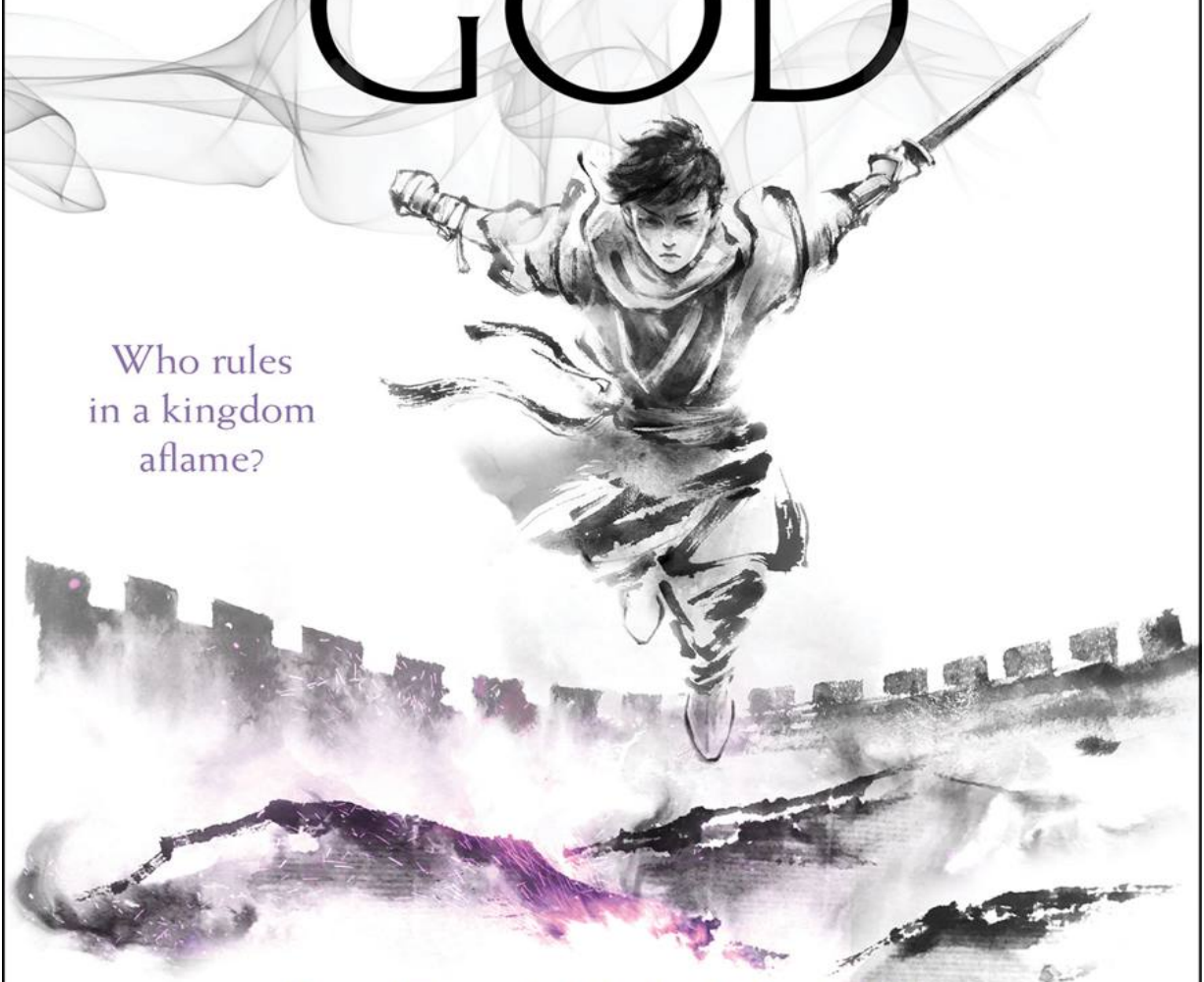


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AWARD-NOMINATED AUTHOR

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THE BURNING GOD

THE POPPY WAR, BOOK THREE

R. F. KUANG



HARPER Voyager

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Dedication

*To my dear readers, who stayed with this series until the end, and came
prepared with a bucket for their tears*

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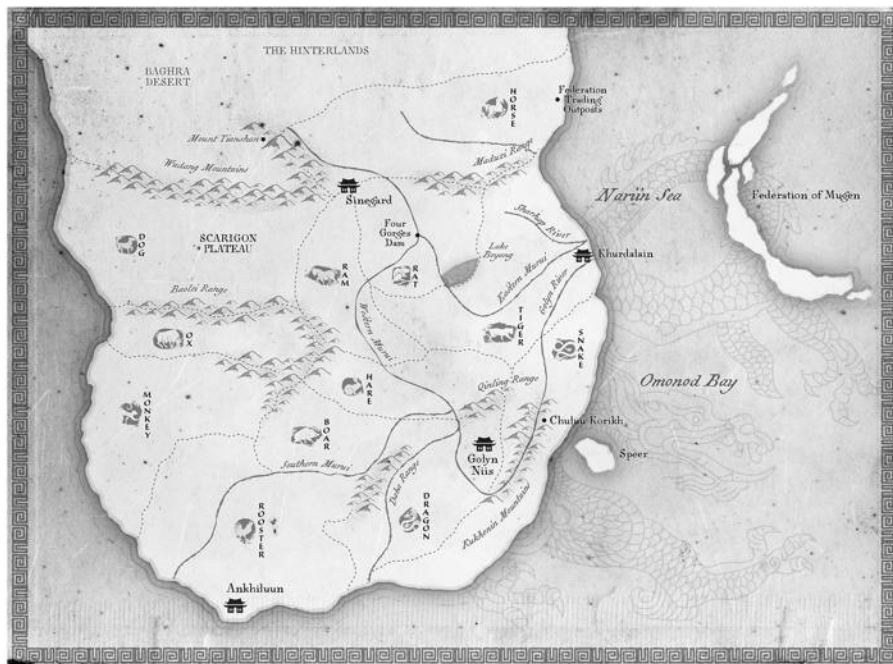
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World Map



Prologue

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” Daji said.

The campfire burned an unnatural shade of purple, sparking and hissing reproachfully as if it could sense her guilt. Tendrils of flame reached out like grasping hands that transformed into flickering faces that, months later, still made Daji’s stomach twist with shame. She looked away.

But the dead were seared into the backs of her eyelids, their mouths still open in shock at her betrayal. Their whispers echoed in her mind, the same way they echoed every night in her dreams.

Murderer, they said. Ingrate. Whore.

Fear squeezed her chest. “Riga, I don’t think—”

“Too late for second guesses now, sweetheart.” Across the fire, Riga was binding a struggling deer with his usual brutal, callous efficiency. He’d already arranged three serrated knives, all looted from the corpses of Ketreyid archers, in a perfect triangle around the fire. Daji hadn’t touched hers. She’d been too scared—the glinting metal looked poisonous, resentful. “We’re far past the point of no return, don’t you think?”

The deer arched its neck, straining to break free. Riga grasped its antlers with one hand and slammed its head to the ground.

The flames jumped higher; the whispers intensified. Daji flinched. “This feels wrong.”

Riga snorted. “When did you become such a coward?”

“I’m just worried. Tseveri said—”

“Who cares what she said?” Riga sounded brittle, defensive. Daji knew he, too, was ashamed. She could tell some small part of him wished they’d never started down this path. But he could never admit that. If he did, he’d break.

Riga, pinning the deer's neck down with one knee, jerked twine around its front legs. The deer's mouth opened as if to scream, but the only sound it could make was a hoarse, eerie rasp. "Tseveri's always been full of shit. Prophecy, my ass—don't believe that babble. She was just saying whatever the Sorqan Sira wanted us to hear."

"She said this would kill us," Daji said.

"That's not precisely what she said."

"It's close enough."

"Oh, Daji." Riga tightened the last knot with a cruel yank, examined his handiwork for a moment, then moved to sit down beside her. His hand massaged her back in slow circles. He meant to be comforting. It felt like a trap. "Do you think I'd ever let anything happen to you?"

Daji struggled to keep her breathing even.

Do what he says, she reminded herself. That was the deal she'd made with Ziya. *Keep your head down and obey, or Riga will find some way to get rid of you*. She should be glad for this ritual. It was protection—the ultimate guarantee that Riga could not kill her without killing himself, a shield for her and Ziya both.

But still she was so afraid. What if this was worse than death?

She found her voice. "There has to be some other way—"

"There isn't," Riga snapped. "We won't last much longer like this. This war's gotten too big. Our enemies have grown too many." He gestured with his knife toward the forest. "And if Ziya keeps acting like that, he won't last another day."

He won't last because you've pushed him, Daji wanted to snap back. But she held her tongue for fear of stoking his temper. His cruelty.

You don't have another choice. She'd realized long ago that she needed to make herself absolutely necessary to Riga if she wanted to stay safe.

Indispensable, anchored and chained to his very life.

"Come on, Ziya." Riga cupped his hands around his mouth and called out. "Let's get this over with."

The trees were silent.

Riga raised his voice. "*Ziya*. I know you're out there."

Maybe he ran, Daji thought. *Clever bastard*.

She wondered what Riga might do if Ziya really did try to escape. He'd chase him, of course, and likely catch him—Riga had always been the strongest and fastest of them all. The punishment would be terrible. But Daji might fend Riga off for a few minutes, buy Ziya some time, and even if that cost her her life at least one of them would be spared.

But seconds later Ziya came wandering through the forest, stumbling as if drunk. His eyes had that bemused, wild look that Daji had recently grown

accustomed to seeing on his face. She knew it meant danger. Her hand crept toward her knife.

Riga stood and approached Ziya like a keeper might a tiger, hands spread cautiously out before him. "How are you?"

"How am I?" Ziya tilted his head. "Whatever do you mean?"

Daji saw Riga's throat pulse.

"Can you come sit down?" Riga asked.

Ziya shook his head, snickering.

"This isn't funny," Riga snarled. "Come here, Ziya."

"Ziya?" Ziya's eyes tipped to the sky. "Who's that?"

Riga reached for his sword. Daji raised her knife. They'd prepared for this, all three of them, with Ziya's consent. They had to strike just before he opened the gate—

Ziya's face split into a horrible grin. "Kidding."

Riga relaxed. "Fuck you."

Daji exhaled and tried to slow her frantically beating heart.

Ziya sat down cross-legged in front of the fire. His eyes flickered toward the bound deer with a cursory interest. "It's acting very tame, isn't it?"

He picked his own knife up from the ground and dangled it before the deer. Fire glinted off the serrated edge. The deer lay still, indifferent. It might have been dead save for its resigned, labored breathing.

"Daji shoved a wad of opium down its mouth," Riga said.

"Ah." Ziya winked at her. "Clever girl."

Daji wished the drug had taken effect earlier. She wished Riga had given it time. But that would require empathy—a trait he most certainly did not possess.

"Look alive, Daji." Riga brandished his knife at her. "Let's not drag this out."

Daji sat frozen in place. For a brief moment she considered running. Her knees trembled.

No. There's no way out. If she didn't do this for herself, she at least had to do it for Ziya.

He liked to fucking joke. He'd never been able to take anything seriously; only he would be amused by the prospect of losing his own mind. But her fear—hers and Riga's—was real. Ziya had been careening on the line between sanity and madness for months, and they didn't know when he'd tip into the void for good. Only this could bring him back.

But oh, how it had cost them.

"Knives up," Riga said.

They obeyed. The deer was tame beneath the blades, eyes open and glassy.

Riga began to speak. Every word of the incantation they'd lied, tortured, and murdered to obtain made the fire rise higher and higher, until flames ten feet high jumped toward the night sky. When Tseveri had spoken these words, they had sounded like music. On Riga's tongue, they sounded like a curse. Daji squeezed her eyes shut, trying to block out the screams in her mind.

Riga finished chanting. Nothing happened.

They sat there for a long time, their confusion mounting, until Ziya's laughter broke the silence.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Riga demanded.

"You're saying it wrong," Ziya said.

"The fuck does that mean?"

"It's your accent. This won't work with you butchering the words like that."

"You do it, then." Riga spat something else under his breath. Mugenese words, a slur he'd picked up as a child. *Horse lover*.

"I don't know the words," Ziya said.

"Yes, you do." A malicious edge crept into Riga's voice. "She taught them to you first."

Ziya stiffened.

Don't do it, Daji thought. Let's kill him and run.

Ziya began the incantation. His voice turned gradually from a hoarse whisper to a shout, forceful and fluid. This time the words sounded closer to how they'd sounded on Tseveri's tongue. This time they held power.

"Now," Riga whispered, and they raised their knives to slaughter the last necessary innocent.

When it was over, the void flung them back into their material bodies with a shock like icy water. Daji lurched forward, gasping. The earth felt so solid under her legs, the air so sweet. The world became the familiar made strange—solid and beautiful and mystifying. Daji was burning inside, shaking from the sheer power arcing through her body.

She felt more alive than she'd ever been. Now she was three souls instead of one; now she was complete; now she was *more*.

They hadn't fully returned yet from the world of spirit. Their connection hadn't severed. She was still reading into Ziya's and Riga's souls, and their thoughts crashed into her mind so loudly she struggled to separate them from her own.

From Ziya, she felt cold and naked fear combined with a terrible relief. He didn't want this. He'd never wanted any of this. He was so scared of what he

might become but also grateful for his deliverance from the alternative. He was grateful to be bound.

From Riga, she felt both giddy delight and a dizzying rush of ambition. He wanted more. He wasn't even paying attention to the panic radiating from Ziya. His thoughts were on greater things. He saw them on a battlefield, at a negotiating table, on three thrones.

To Riga, this had been the last obstacle. Now they were tipping forward into the future he'd always imagined for them.

Daji wanted it, too. She just wasn't sure she'd survive it.

Slowly she opened her eyes. The blood coating her hands looked black in the moonlight. The fire had nearly gone out, yet the smoke threatened to suffocate. Daji almost fell forward into the embers, almost smothered her face in the ash and let it end there.

Strong fingers gripped her shoulder and dragged her back.

"Easy." Riga grinned.

Daji couldn't share in his euphoria.

Years later, when she tortured herself with memories of the three of them at the beginning, before everything had gone so dreadfully wrong, she could never remember how it felt when they were first anchored. Couldn't remember the thrill of power, or the terrifying yet delightful sense of being known. All she remembered was a curdling dread—the certainty that one day, the secrets they'd stolen would be paid for in blood.

And Tseveri. Always in her mind she saw the dead girl's wretched face, and heard so clearly the last warning she'd uttered before Ziya ripped her heart out of her chest.

Here's a prophecy for you, she'd said.

One will die.

One will rule.

And one will sleep for eternity.

Part I

Chapter 1

Rin's wrist throbbed.

The air always felt different on the morning of an ambush, as if an electric charge, the crackling residue of a thunderstorm, thrummed through her and every soldier around her. Rin had never felt energy like this when she'd fought for the Republic. In the beginning, Yin Vaisra's troops had been consummate professionals—sullen, grim, there to finish the job and get out. By the end, they'd been fearful. Desperate.

But the soldiers of the Southern Coalition were *angry*, and that force alone had driven them through grueling weeks of basic training, had quickly shaped them into capable killers even though not so long ago many of them had never even touched a sword.

It helped that their fight was personal. Khudla wasn't their town, but this was their province, and everyone in Monkey Province had suffered the same way under Mugenese occupation. Displacement, looting, rape, murder, mass executions. A thousand Golyn Niis-level massacres had played out over the land, and no one had cared, because no one in the Republic or the Empire had ever cared much about the south.

But some in the south had survived to avenge their dead, and those were the men and women who comprised Rin's troops.

As the minutes trickled past, the gathered ranks bristled in anticipation like hunting dogs straining against the leash. And Rin's wrist stung like a conducting rod, a million little jolts of pain shooting through her elbow every second.

"Stop rubbing," Kitay admonished. "You're irritating it."

"It hurts," she said.

"Because you're rubbing it. Leave it alone and it'll heal faster."

Rin ran her fingers over the cracked, bumpy skin that covered the bone of her wrist where it should have extended into a right hand. She clenched her jaw, trying to resist the urge to dig her nails into flesh long rubbed raw.

She'd had the hand amputated the night they made port in Ankhiluun. By then, after two weeks at sea, the appendage had all but rotted into a gangrenous mess. For all of the Black Lily physician's efforts to sterilize the wound, there had remained so many points of exposure in her skin that it was a miracle the infection hadn't spread farther up her arm. The procedure was short. Moag's personal physician had cut away Rin's hand, trimmed down the rotting flesh, and sewed her skin into a neat flap over the exposed bone.

The wound itself healed cleanly enough. But when Rin stopped taking laudanum, the wrist became a torch of unbearable agony. Phantom pains flashed through fingers she no longer had several times an hour. Sometimes they were so bad she slammed her hand at the wall to dull the pricks with a greater pain, only to remember that the hand wasn't there. The pain was imaginary. And she couldn't dull pain that existed purely in her mind.

"You're going to make it bleed," Kitay said.

Rin had, without thinking, begun to scratch again. She cupped her fingers over the stump and squeezed hard, trying to drive out the itching with sheer, numbing pressure. "It's driving me mad. It's not just the itching, it's the fingers. It's like I can still feel them, and they're being pricked with a thousand needles, only I can't do anything about it."

"I think I get it," Kitay said. "I feel it, too, sometimes. Little tremors out of nowhere. Which is strange, if you think about it—I'm the one with fingers, but the pain is coming from you."

Before her surgery, they'd worried that cutting away her rotted right hand might also sever Kitay's. They didn't know the limits of their anchor bond. They knew that death for one meant death for both. They felt each other's pain, and injuries to one manifested in pale, faintly visible scars for the other. But they didn't know what that meant for amputations.

By the time they docked in Ankhiluun, however, Rin's infections were so inflamed that the pain for both of them was unbearable, and Kitay had declared through gritted teeth that if Rin wouldn't cut away the hand, he'd gnaw it off himself.

To their great relief, his own arm remained intact. A ridged white line appeared around his wrist like a bracelet where the incision was made, but his fingers were still functional, if somewhat stiff. Occasionally Rin saw him struggling to hold an ink brush, and he now took much longer to dress in the mornings. But he still had his hand, and though Rin was relieved, she couldn't help but feel a constant, lingering jealousy.

"Can you see it?" She waved her wrist at him. "A little ghost hand?"

"You should put a hook on that," he said.

"I'm not putting a fucking hook on it."

"A blade, then. Then maybe you'd start practicing."

She shot him an irritated look. "I'll get around to it."

"You're never going to get around to it," he said. "Keep acting like this and the first time you pick up a sword will be the last."

"I won't need to—"

"You know you might. Think, Rin, what happens when—"

"Not now," she snapped. "I don't want to talk about this now."

She hated practicing with a sword. She hated fumbling at things with her left hand that her right hand had once done unconsciously. It made her feel helpless and stupid and inadequate, and she had spent such a long time trying to convince herself that she wasn't powerless anymore. The first time she'd grasped a sword, a week after her surgery, her left arm had shaken with such debilitating weakness that she'd immediately flung the blade to the ground in disgust. She couldn't bear feeling like that again.

"I see the problem," Kitay said. "You're nervous."

"I don't get nervous."

"Bullshit. You're terrified. That's why you're fidgeting. You're scared."

For good fucking reason, Rin thought.

Her throbbing wrist wasn't the problem, just the symptom. She was searching for something, anything to go wrong. Their position could have been compromised. The Mugenese could know they were coming.

Or they might simply lose.

She hadn't dealt with defenses this good before. The Mugenese at Khudla knew Rin's troops were coming; their guard had been up for days. And they were primed to fear nighttime attacks now, even though most ambushing forces wouldn't dare launch such a tricky operation without adequate light. This would be no easy, devastating raid.

But Rin couldn't fail today.

Khudla was a test. She'd been begging the Monkey Warlord for a command position ever since they'd escaped Arlong, only to be told over and over that she couldn't lead entire columns into battle until she had the experience. Today, at last, he'd put her in charge.

Liberating Khudla was her mission, and hers alone. Until now she'd been fighting like a unit of one, a juggernaut of fire that the Southern Coalition threw into battles like a wide-range missile. Now she was leading a brigade of hundreds.

These soldiers fought under her command. That terrified her. What if they died under her command?

“We have this down like clockwork. The guard changes every thirty minutes,” Kitay said. They’d been over this a dozen times before, but he was repeating it to calm her down. “You’ll know when the voices change. Get as close as you can before sunset, and then hit during the transition. Do you know the signals?”

She took a deep breath. “Yes.”

“Then you’ve got nothing to worry about.”

If only saying it made it so.

The minutes crawled past. Rin watched the sun dipping toward the mountains, dropping reluctantly, as if dragged downward by some creature in the valley below.

After Rin had raised the Phoenix on the Isle of Speer and ended the Third Poppy War, there was no formal surrender by the Federation of Mugen. Emperor Ryohai and his progeny were turned instantly into charcoal statues under mountains of ash. No one in the Mugenese imperial family survived to negotiate for peace.

So there had been no armistice, no treaty. No Mugenese generals provided a map of their troop placements and turned their weapons over to the Nikara leadership. Instead, all remaining Federation soldiers on the mainland became rogue threats—highly skilled roving soldiers without mission or nation. Yin Vaisra, the former Dragon Warlord and newly elected President of the Nikara Republic, could have dealt conclusively with them months ago, but he’d let them roam free to undercut his own allies in a long-term ploy to strengthen his grasp on the crumbling Nikara Empire. Now those scattered platoons had organized into several large independent bands terrorizing the south. For all intents and purposes, the Nikara and the Mugenese remained at war. Even without support from the longbow island, the Mugenese had essentially colonized the south in a matter of months. And Rin had let them, obsessed as she’d been with Vaisra’s insurrection while the real war was being fought at home.

She’d failed the south once. She wouldn’t do it again.

“Kazuo says the ships are still coming,” spoke a voice in Mugini. It was a boy’s voice, thin and reedy.

“Kazuo is a fucking idiot,” said his companion.

Rin and Kitay crouched hidden behind the tall grass. They’d crept close enough to the Mugenese camp that they could hear patrolmen gossiping idly, their hushed voices traveling far over still night air. Still, Rin’s Mugini was rusty from more than a year of disuse, and she had to strain her ears to understand what they were saying.

“This language is like insect chitter,” Nezha had once complained, back when they’d been stupid young children crammed into a classroom at Sinegard, when they had yet to realize that the war they were training to fight wasn’t hypothetical.

Nezha had hated Mugini lessons, Rin remembered. He hadn’t been able to comprehend the language when spoken at its standard rapid clip, so he’d spent class each day mocking it, making his fellow students laugh with gibberish that sounded so much like real sentences.

“*Click click click*,” he’d said, and made scuttling noises between his teeth. “Like little bugs.”

Like crickets, Rin thought. They’d started calling the Mugenese that in the countryside. Rin didn’t know if it was a new slur or an old insult recycled from a time before her birth. She wouldn’t have been surprised by the latter. History moved in circles—she’d learned that very well by now.

“Kazuo said that ships have started coming into the ports in Tiger Province,” said the first voice she’d heard, the boy’s voice. “They’re docking in the shadows, ferrying us back handful by handful—”

The second patrolman snorted. “That’s bullshit. We’d know by now if they had.”

There was a brief silence. Someone stirred in the grass. The patrolmen were lying down, Rin realized. Perhaps they were star-gazing. That was stupid of them, wildly irresponsible. But they sounded so very young; they sounded not like soldiers but like children. Did they simply not know any better?

“The moon is different here,” the first patrolman said wistfully.

Rin recognized that phrase. She’d learned it at Sinegard—it was an old Mugini expression, some aphorism derived from a myth about a ferryman who loved a woman who lived on a distant star, who built her a bridge between two worlds so that they could finally embrace.

The moon is different here. He meant he wanted to go home.

The Mugenese were always talking about going home. She heard about it every time she eavesdropped on them. They spoke about home like it still existed, like the longbow island was some beautiful paradise where they could easily return if only the ships would come to harbor. They spoke about their mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers who awaited them on their shores, spared somehow from the scorching pyroclastic flows.

“You’d better get used to this moon,” said the second patrolman.

The more they spoke, the younger they sounded. Rin pictured their faces in her head; their voices brought to mind gangly limbs and fuzzy upper lips. They couldn’t be older than her—they had to be just over twenty, possibly younger.