

OF  
CAPTIVITY

&

KINGS

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## OF CAPTIVITY & KINGS

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# MAP

CREATED BY MELHAK



# PROLOGUE

MEROË – 4<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY A.D.

“Don’t be scared. You can trust me,” her neighbor repeated softly, the blood dripping from the edge of his blade creating a scarlet pool around his feet as he moved the scimitar behind his back and out of sight.

The ten feet of space between them in her sandstone home had become a canyon. Her father on his back in the middle, gutted from navel to throat as his blood created a sea around them. And she, his eldest daughter, an unwitting witness who had stumbled upon this crime. *What has he done to my father?* Frozen, Nekili pointed the farming scythe at him, arm shaking violently from the weight of the steel in her eight-year-old hands. Her sister’s small arms suddenly wrapped themselves around her waist, squeezing tighter as though she held fast to the only tree for miles in the midst of a sandstorm in Meroë. Looking at her neighbor, Nekili hesitated.

Voices shouted outside in the darkness and her chest heaved as she struggled to breathe from the weight of what might happen next. Ezana’s soldiers forced their way in, filling the room like fire as she cowered with her sister in the corner. Left, right, up, and down the blades met over and over again as blood sprayed across her face. When it grew quiet she looked up. Pointing the scimitar at her, her neighbor gritted his teeth, nostrils flaring as he narrowed his eyes. A *khopesh* protruded from his back, the blade covered in blood and entrails as he smiled apologetically at her, opening his mouth slowly.

“Run.”

Grabbing Naima’s hand, she leapt over the dead bodies on the ground and past the door, not looking back once as she fled the carnage. They were being hunted. Leaves and branches whipped at her face, clawing at her skin and tangling in her thick, black hair as she ran blindly through the dark away from Meroë, dragging her sister along behind her as her heart hammered in

her chest. Snatching branches out of her way she did her best to keep quiet, even as they left long, red scratches on her brown skin. She didn't cry out. If she did the slavers would hear and they would find them all. They needed to cross the Nile and reach the desert. Pressing on, the sand sucked at her feet as she pushed huge leaves aside, the wood snapping like the sound of her father's fingers when her *papo* cracked his knuckles. *My dead father*. As much as she wanted to grieve she had no time. His face arose in her mind and kept her pressing on. Black blood seeping from his mouth, fog colored eyes staring at the ceiling, neck twisted like the vines wrapped around the acacia trees which grew in her family's sorghum fields. She didn't have time to wonder where her mother was. Or her older brother. There'd been no sign of them. It wouldn't be her fate. Or her sister's. The last memories of her brother and father working in their sorghum fields just outside of Meroë seemed so long ago. The ragged breathing of her sister brought her back, Naima squeezing her hand as though she meant to break it, trying to keep running as a lion would if the cheetah hunted him. The mongrels' faint barking was the only sound that warned how close the slavers were. If they weren't fast enough they would soon be slaves. And slaves were property, and property was money and power.

Slowing down as she reached a clearing, her eyes widened. There were so many of them. Farmers, blacksmiths, herders, fisherman, many she recognized. They were standing there, still as stone, and the hairs rose on the back of her neck and arms. A scream cut through the air, high, and shrill, and terrified, as everything seemed to happen at once. Arrows flew from the trees to her right and she grabbed her sister and began to run again. Their lives depended on it. All around them men and women fell like stones to the ground, screaming in the darkness like the lambs her father slaughtered for meat.

Her arm wrenched behind her and she looked back in time to see her sister crumple to the ground. Kneeling quickly, she pressed her hand over Naima's heart. She wasn't dead, only hurt and stunned. Without a beat she gripped Naima around her waist, dragging her towards a tiny sandstone structure meant for holding cattle at the edge of the clearing, the sound of steel tipped arrows hitting trees and flesh filling her ears.

Tears ran down her face as she pushed her sister inside,

squeezing in behind her. Pulling her sister into her lap she held her close, rocking her against her body. Blood ran from a cut on her leg. With a small sigh of relief she looked up. Eleven pairs of eyes stared back at her, wide and scared in the moonlight shining through the top air hole as arrows continued raining against the shelter. The smell of sweat and fear hung in the air. Suddenly a man, tall and brown shouldered inside, grabbing her sister's leg to drag her out and get inside himself.

Nekili screamed and reached for his leg, sinking her teeth into his ankle as the arrows continued hitting the walls like so many bees zipping by her ears. When he stumbled she pushed him roughly, the arrows hitting his body and ripping through his clothing as she pulled her sister close again. She wiped the tears from her sister's face and looked back up at the eleven pairs of unblinking eyes. None of them judged her. *Apedemak save us.*

A moment later, the assault stopped, and silence fell over the clearing. She reached for her sister's leg tenderly. It had only been grazed.

"Can you walk?" she whispered.

Naima nodded, resting her head on Nekili's shoulder as the smell of shit and blood filled the air. She tried to push the thoughts from her head in the silence, but it didn't work. Her family had been torn apart in a second. Squeezing her eyes shut she could still remember the feel of the breeze against her cheeks earlier that morning as she ran through her family's sorghum fields just outside of Meroë. The tall, stepped sandstone pyramids just in sight in the distance as she ran. Stalks slapping at her legs and knees as she searched for her father.

"Papo!" Running through the stalks Nekili had made a beeline to her father, Naqyrin, cutting through the tall stalks towards him, her shoulder length, coal curls bouncing as she came, hopping over the burrows in the earth. When she reached him she lifted her hands towards him and he laughed, picking her up as she tried to catch her breath. Turning her head from left to right wordlessly she spotted her brother Neka from his yells. After a moment she sighed and put her head against his shoulder. Her heart beat furiously like a hummingbird's wings as it settled from her sprint, the hot sun against her face. She was over a mile away from their home.

"Papo," she began slowly, "Mother wants to know what you

and Neka want for dinner. Can I climb the tree with Neka? I'm big enough now and I can run faster than him, Papo."

"Yes you can--"

Her gasp interrupted him. "I can?" she asked excitedly, her head lifting immediately.

"Run faster than him. You know I don't want you up there. Use the ground. There is nowhere to fall."

"Hmmp," came her reply. She laid her head back down on his shoulder again, wrapping her arm around his neck as she rested.

"Ahhhhhhhh!"

The piercing scream made her father turn quickly, scanning the fields around him as he searched for the source of the sound. When he found it he chuckled. She twisted in his arms to follow his gaze. A flock of red-beaked birds swarmed in the air above her brother's head. Palm sized feathered birds that obsessively devoured the sorghum if they weren't careful. She'd seen them terrorize elephants in huge numbers. They were ruthless.

"Neka!" her father called to her brother. Neka stood atop a young acacia tree, sticks and pebbles in his hand, waving them wildly, the tree shaking slightly under his weight. The birds cawed back at him as some flew away, others, disinterested until his stones got close enough. Hopping back and forth they teased him mercilessly as he continued wildly shaking the branches and throwing pebbles.

"Papo, I'm keeping the sorghum safe!" Neka yelled, legs shaking as he moved the acacia tree with his weight.

"Tch tch, do it quietly," her father called back, his deep voice full of amusement.

"Papo, how? The birds are not scared of me."

"That is because they can fly away and you cannot follow. They are not scared of anything. They are flying locusts!"

"Papo, make me a bird," her brother cried back.

Her father had laughed, throwing his head back, shoulders shaking. "You want the world."

"Not the world," Neka said. "Just wings!"

"It's time to come down soon, we are almost done. I want you to help draw water with Nekili."

"Naima went to draw water already, Papo," Nekili told him, squirming in his arms to let him know to put her down. Quickly seating herself on the ground among the sorghum, she began to

tie the stalks into small figures next to her. "She'll be back in time for dinner."

"Excellent."

Stretching as he picked up his rake, her father looked across at the bright red fields, eyes straining against the dying sun. Nekili squinted as she looked up at him. His shoulders were strong from his farming as well as his support of other farms by picking that grown from the adjacent fields when they were shorthanded. It was a strong grain regardless of the rainfall. Neka continued hollering at the top of his lungs, shaking the acacia tree with his legs as he gripped a branch with his right hand, his left waving wildly about as he tried to disperse the birds and prevent them from landing among the sorghum. Nekili shook her head as her brother continued, determined, undaunted.

"Brother Naqyrin!" a voice called. "May Apedemak keep you!" Their neighbor was making tracks around the stalks, careful not to tread on the sorghum, his head bobbing between the red seeds as he moved.

"Brother," his greeting came with an outstretched hand.

Her father grabbed it once before releasing it to grip his forearm where his elbow connected tightly.

"How have you been, Kedjeh?" he asked him.

"Well. Truly. Well," came their neighbor's reply. "The flooding season is almost here. Will you have all you need?"

"With the gods pleasure. Half of our food we have bundled into sacks for the market. Some I hope to send south to my cousins in Nabara for trade during their Festival of Kings next month. I think it will be a very productive grain." Her father's dark eyes were excited and lively as he thought about the prospect of the sale.

"Have you any word from Nudolla? From the Kingdom of Nabara?" neighbor Kedjeh asked. "Or the Sao?" he asked suddenly.

Her father shook his head. "Only what some have told me when they passed through heading south."

"It is not a good time to be without friends or neighbors. They are moving closer, Naqyrin. King Roktami should have asked Kashta for help! From the Kingdom of Nabara I'm told High King Kashta *still* commands over a *thousand Medjay* and holds alliances with neighboring kingdoms. More than enough to aid us. The



slavers are finding ways to move to the interior. Creating garrisons in Berber cities just like Cuicul. And even here, outside of Meroë, there are problems with raiders and thieves who seek to usurp trade routes.”

“They will not survive here. The desert will kill them faster than we can.” Turning his head towards her, her father smiled brightly and she grinned back before twisting the stalks into dolls again with her fingers as she continued listening. “It is too far and King Roktami of Kush does all he can to ensure there are still trade routes left for us,” her father had emphasized, continuing to cut the stalks.

“Not anymore, Naqyrin,” neighbor Kedjeh whispered, stepping closer to her father. She made sure not to look up as she continued eavesdropping on their conversation lest her father send her away. “They have Berber guides, they marry them, and they trade with them. And the rest they sell and send across the sea for their gladiator games. This Ethiopian King Ezana does not care except to trade with the Romans and usurp the trade routes of Kush. Our resources are too tempting for him to leave us alone. He trades whatever he is able to. Even his *own*. Our Kushite King of Meroë will not last much longer. The only place we will be safe will be the desert and then we must live like the Christian hermits I hear rumors of. Drowning in the sand. Always running with our tails between our legs like hunted *beasts*. Ezana will eat our hearts and that of King Roktami if he so chooses! My cousin has seen it with his own two eyes,” their neighbor pointed at her father, his second and third finger aimed at him. Shaking his head their neighbor tapped his right fist against his left before spreading his right fingers wide, quickly bringing them up to eye level. “You must *open* yours!”

Nekili bit her lip at the tone he took and looked back and forth between him and her father. Fear ran through every word he uttered.

After a moment their neighbor spotted her on the ground, catching her eye before she was able to look away. “Hello little one,” neighbor Kedjeh smiled at her and she waved back. Their neighbor finally touched her father on the shoulder. Until tomorrow morning?”

Her father nodded, watching as he left. "We will have some of this with dinner." He planted a wet kiss on her cheek as he shook her slightly, throwing her into the air as she giggled happily before setting her down.

"I did not forget, Papo. I want to climb. I will remember," she warned him, pouting as she looked at him.

"I know, Nekili, I know," he replied reaching down with his scythe to cut the leaves and bed seeds from the sorghum cane at his feet.

"One day I'll be as tall as a hippopotamus, you know."

"Hippos are not tall, Nekili. You will be fat."

"Ah! Papo, no. I will be tall. You will see." He tweaked her pug nose as her cheeks puffed out. Smiling he leaned down to cut the sorghum cane and separate the seeds and leaves.

Watching him closely she worked next to him, helping move the freed leaves and seeds a little further from him and out of his way as they were cut. The workers would return to help in the morning.

"After you see your mother take your sister with you to the *manas*." The pools were a distance, but she and her sister loved to play in them. And at this time, with such little water her father never worried about dangerous animals. The water was drying with the hot dry winds blowing harder and the rain was not as abundant as before this season. He handed her the bundle of sorghum and a piece of sorghum cane the length of her forearm. She began chewing on it immediately, her little fingers tightly wrapped around the middle of the cane for a firm grip. At eight she ate more than her sister and brother combined yet she was as slim as a stalk. Her father had lifted her up one time and turned her upside down as she laughed and screamed to see if anything would come out.

"She's your daughter," her mother always told him, "it is no wonder she eats like a hippopotamus. It is all she sees."

Coming to stand next to her, her father put one hand atop her head, looking around him. Laughter sounded in the distance and Nekili frowned, looking up at him as he met her eyes. It was most likely hyenas. They came too close sometimes. Closer than she expected. Closer than her family wanted. Leaning against her father's leg she wondered if she would ever see one. From the stories her brother told her, she never wanted to.

A hand touched her cheek and she looked up at her father's worried eyes as she sucked at the cane. "Papo?" she asked, her big brown eyes full of concern. He pulled her closer to his side.

"It is nothing, Kili," he smiled and waited until the smile came back to her face. "Go. Take this to your mother and then to the river and find Naima, my little cheetah." She had smiled, nodding and lifting the sorghum bundle before taking off through the field as fast as her legs would carry her.

Faint barking met her ears and the memory faded from her mind as the darkness pressed against her eyes and the smell of blood reached her nose.

"We have to move before they come," she whispered to Naima, her eyes wide in the darkness as she put her mouth closer to her sister's ear. "Or they'll find us and take us to King Ezana."

The others started moving too, running outside quickly, tentatively as the familiar song began. Barking. Grabbing Naima's hand she pulled her outside and towards the oasis near the Nile, tears running down her face, blurring her vision she ran. They could swim across the Nile if they reached it. She had to try. Mud sucked at her feet as the slavers closed in on them and she looked down in confusion. The oasis was bordered by sand. Nothing but sand and a short distance away sat the Nile. But not anymore. Now the oasis was a wide stretch of mud and refuse and rank water that was filled with the leavings of animal bones and waste. But if they reached it they could hide. If they reached it they might live. Screams cut the air as the dogs found runners. They would be next. Dragging her sister, she pulled her into the swamp, up to her chin.

"Nekili," Naima sobbed, terrified. "I want *papo*," she *protested between sobs*. I can't-

"When I tell you to, you go under. And don't come back up until I say," she whispered back.

"I can't..."

The dogs broke through the brush and she grabbed a hollow stick floating on the water. She sank back into the water next to Naima, putting the stick into her sister's mouth and ignoring her eyes as they widened.

"Breathe through your mouth. Only your mouth. And don't come back up until I squeeze your hand twice."

She pushed her sister under slowly until her shoulders disappeared and then the top of her head and only the stick remained. It was the hardest thing she'd ever done. She waited until the dogs' barking was loudest and sank up to her mouth and then her nose. It was an eternity. The mud was thick and the water covered her ears. The barking was faint and she began to tremble as cold seeped into her bones. She counted to forty before she began to panic, releasing her breath slowly every ten seconds after that as she ran out of air. Praying Naima had done what she told her to. Rolling to expose an ear, her heartbeat quickened. Nothing, only silence. She squeezed her sister's hand and Naima's little fingers clawed at her arms, clutching at her clothes as she pulled herself from the mud next to her. Pushing at the bottom of the swamp floor with her feet, she rose slowly, only letting her nose up, her head tilted back. When she rose, she covered Naima's mouth with her hand, forcing her to breathe through her nose.

The warning growl was soft yet frightening. One pair of eyes stared at her and the dog's lips pulled back in a snarl, growling softly. He opened his mouth to bark as Nekili drew back her fist and punched the mongrel as hard as she could in the muzzle. He whined and turned, his tail between his legs as he ran back through the trees. *They didn't see us. They don't realize we are here.* All of her panic gave way as she clutched her sister's hand, slowly turning to look at the water. She thought the oasis was filled with logs, clogging the base of the river along with refuse in the swamp. But there were more than logs around them. She gasped as her eyes landed on at least thirty corpses. Most bloated and decaying rapidly. The open mouthed surprise on her father's face as he lay in his own blood in the doorway of their home flashed before her eyes as she looked at the slaver's victims. Her vision blurred and she angrily wiped at her tears.

Next to her, Naima retched into the swamp again and again, her whole body shaking. "I want *papo*," her sobs cut Nekili's skin, closing her throat. "King Roktami...maybe... we can get to Nabara to see High King Amkarqa Kashta. He can help-

Nekili turned and grabbed her sister by the shoulders. "You heard what Ezana's men said as well as I before he killed our neighbor. You *saw*," her piercing gaze bore into her sister's. "We are *everywhere*." Naima's shoulders began to tremble and she pulled her into her arms hugging her tightly. "There's one place I

know they're not. The Scetes. That's where we'll go. No one will find us in the desert. That's where we'll be safe."

"It's too *far*," Naima cried. "It's too *hot*. We'll never make it. We are not hermits they will never take us in!" Naima's face began to crumple as she finished. "I don't want to go, I want *Papo*," Naima sobbed.

Looking up into the trees she spotted an owl landing on a branch above them. It spun its head to the right as it ruffled its feathers, huge eyes looking down on her before hooting softly. A warning. Before Naima could start crying again, she grabbed her sister's hand.

"*Papo's dead.*" Pulling Naima behind her and out of the swamp she pushed the bodies out of the way gingerly. *They are at rest now.* She was not. Their journey had just begun.

# KOMORO

“Must we attend the Festival of Kings this year? Missing one won’t matter. Send Ketemin if you wish one of us to go,” Komoro said simply, stretching on his hammock.

“It will,” King Kwasi replied. “All of the families attend to show their strength, the skill of their warriors, and to speak of our alliances. Further, as we are a patrilineal kingdom, your sister is not my immediate heir,” his uncle finished, frowning.

“Even the fake alliances?”

“Hold your tongue,” his uncle commanded. “I still hold the throne of the Kingdom of the Sun and will until I die and not before!” His uncle’s voice echoed across the great hall. The servants took no notice, continuing with their duties as before.

His uncle lectured him constantly. He would rule the Sao Kingdom someday true, but not until his uncle took leave of him or stepped down. Both were unlikely to happen in the near future. The people loved his uncle far too much, and he was in excellent shape for his age despite nearing three quarters of a century. The king continued to supervise sparring among the soldiers, his red cloak flying in the wind. At his back the sun shone brightly against the desert, and he looked as if he were aflame. The snakehead of his staff seemed even more menacing, its jaws open, lifelike as his uncle’s fist gripped it, the falcon head of Ra inscribed on an amulet on his chest.

Komoro gritted his teeth, holding back his retort. His ebony skin shone in the light of the sun. The Sao Kingdom worshipped the sun. And the women worshipped him. Women loved his skin. They told him he was blessed with the blood of the old ones to be so loved by Ra, the Sun God. A true son of Ra. His brilliant white teeth seemed a row of perfect ivory when he spoke. His eyes were almost black as he closed them to gather his words. Completely shaven, he preferred to keep his hair cut close, smooth, loving how women would stroke his head when they spoke to him, begging his favor. Tall yet slim, he avoided hard labor; his narrow

frame often frequented the bathing pools and wine farmers of the city. He wore a white shendyt and red overlay, his headdress falling low on his brow; gold chains, bracelets, and earrings decorated his person so much that one could hear him coming. The more lavish, the better.

His uncle was growing harder to reason with. Why must he wait for his inheritance? He was the firstborn. Komoro's father had died when he was only ten, and before he'd done so, he'd taken care to appoint his uncle as successor before his son took the throne. Succession by appointment of another bloodline was rare, but legal. And limited. He'd resented his uncle's rule ever since. Though he'd hidden it well.

"Yes, Uncle. You know best. I merely meant that it is such a great distance, at your age. I only meant to spare you." He said contritely. "But it's such an old tradition. Why not bring new ways? Faster? Better? The only great thing of the past was the Red Summer. Would that we could still use it to collect additional taxes. With the long drought, food will grow scarce."

"You are not to mention such measures in my presence again. Collecting additional taxes in a drought is tantamount to ordering the deaths of our people. With the increasing drought, there will be less food from the farmers of the Sao Kingdom. The Red Summer brought more than wealth, Nephew. The people began to starve, growing anxious as they watched their children's bellies enlarge while their ribs began to protrude. We could not feed them all. Some took measures into their own hands and began to eat...any one they could find. Old and young alike died in this manner. Class was of no import. Many were openly attacked in the streets without cause. Each person caught was put to death. Family turned against their own. You were too young to remember; though you heard the stories, you did not feel the pain. To be a witness to such a thing is to remember the whole and not the part. One must never shade their history in order to rewrite the past. No matter how ugly a commentary it may be." His uncle sighed. "Nephew," King Kwasi started, "you are an only child, and I fear I've spoiled you. Would that your late father left you more brothers and sisters. It's best that we continue this tradition. The High King began it to honor progress, trade, and peace among the kingdoms. Each year we solve problems and spark development; our ambassadors make new discoveries and foster

relationships and *trade*.”

Rolling his eyes he shook his head as his uncle finished. *More blathering.*

“Come with me, nephew.”

“What?” Komoro turned his head sharply to look at his uncle.

“Come with me,” his uncle repeated firmly, not bothering to wait as he turned swiftly away from the balcony and moved towards the steps that would take him outside of the palace.

Confusion spread across his face, but he followed the old man, moving quickly to keep up with his uncle’s long strides. The litter was already waiting for them, six stunning chocolate mares, brushed until they shone, stood fast. The guards bowed as his uncle approached. One kneeled quickly, his thigh parallel to the ground as his uncle put one foot on the guard’s thigh and stepped up, barely allowing his weight to settle into his heel. Komoro followed, sitting opposite his Uncle as they pulled off quickly.

The wheels rolled swiftly over the sand as their driver kept a tight pace, his initial whip of the reins encouraging the mares to a rapid trot. Like smoke, the sand drifted behind them, stirred by the litter which angrily woke each tiny brother and sister from their gently slumber, before settling again into a sea of desert, the rising wind helping to conceal their tracks. Moving swiftly, they passed large green lakes and lush greenery surrounding them. A private oasis for the weary traveler or a retreat for the citizens of the Sao Empire, many were known to frequent their shores.

“Where are we going?” He couldn’t conceal the boredom in his voice as he finally relaxed in the litter, his gaze falling on the ten warrior escorts following behind them on horseback.

“You’ll see,” his Uncle replied, lazily relaxing in his seat, a satisfied smile on his face.

Komoro nodded. *Toying with me like one of his pets.* It annoyed him to be at the end of one of his uncle’s games. And now, here he was in the middle of the desert, waiting to see where this journey would bring him. Sighing, he stretched out on the seat, tilting his head back as he yawned, allowing the sun to sink into his skin. At least he could sleep until they arrived wherever his uncle’s whims took them.

“Komoro. Komoro.”

“Hmm?” Lifting his head slowly he let out a long yawn, not bothering to cover his mouth as he tried to focus on his Uncle.



Blinking slowly, he tried to shake off the heaviness in his body as the sun and the heat encouraged him to return to sleep.

“We’ve arrived.”

His eyes narrowed as his Uncle stepped from the litter, moving across the sand as though he was floating. Shaking his head again, he followed, eyes moving up towards the sandstone bulwark that loomed in front of them, its rocky countenance at once awe inspiring and menacing. It stood the height of four giraffes, stacked one on top of the other, some ending in stiff unyielding daggers, and others flat plateaus that taunted those from the ground to try and reach them. His sandals were ill equipped to aid him on this climb. Grasping at the narrow walls on either side of him for support he followed behind his uncle, following the strong legs and shoulders, which easily twisted and turned up the rocky paths.

“Ahh!” Pulling his hand back quickly he jumped back, cursing Ra as he watched the green-bellied snake slide down the rocks and disappear into a crevice. His uncle hadn’t turned around once, his bald head still moving upwards without a pause.

When they were almost at the top his uncle finally turned around to face him.

“Wait here,” his uncle commanded, nodding at the escorts at Komoro’s back.

“Yes, Your Grace.” Two of the guards took up their positions, one facing the bottom of the rocky bulwark from which they came and the other facing Komoro. *There’s really no need*, he thought, continuing the climb. *No one in their right mind would climb these cliffs*. Besides, it would be dark soon. Rocks moved under his feet as pebbles pressed into the tender parts of his heels and arches. They might as well have been made of dough. Gritting his teeth as he attempted to find even ground, he finally crested the top, his uncle already there, waiting for him with his hands on his waist as he looked out beyond the horizon.

Komoro stood beside him, looking at his uncle slowly before moving his eyes downward over the edge of the cliff. At least a hundred camels milled below, a quarter of them immersed in the shallow blue-green waters running between the towering sandstone walls. Others drank at the edge, their long necks stretched out in front of them like wilting flowers as they lapped at the water, ears twitching ever so often to keep the flies from

landing for too long. Archways that sank into deep valleys ran to their left and right as the narrow oasis rested comfortably in the middle. From here, he was sure he could even see the edges of their kingdom. Each Sao resident likely winding down. Their thoughts turning to dinner. He never quite bothered to think about it, but with the falling sun and the shadows turning the sharp, jutting rock towers a light purple and pink among its orange brethren, one might even call it beautiful. One day, he would call it *his*.

“The caravans travel through these canyons seeking Sao trade. Go too far, without the proper protection and the unlucky ones may fall victim to caravan robbers. Thieves that will steal anything to sell. Including *salt*,” his uncle finished, looking at him gravely.

“Uncle...” Komoro sighed. *So this is why he brought me here.*

“It’s important that—”

“I know, Uncle. I asked to oversee the salt mines for a reason. I wouldn’t jeopardize it now. Don’t you trust me?” Komoro finished incredulously.

When his uncle turned to look back down into the canyon, silent as a tomb, Komoro pursed his lips. *Of course not.* Who could run the Sao Empire as well as the great Kwasi of the Kingdom of the Sun, the Son of Ra? A title he hadn’t even earned.

“One day, you’ll understand everything,” his Uncle said softly, interrupting his thoughts. Looking down he found his Uncle’s hand resting on his shoulder. “I know you’ll be a great king one day. I hope to live to see it.”

*You’ve lived far too long already.* He regretted the thought immediately, gritting his teeth as he tried to quell the irritation rising in his chest. Here he was looking over what should be his kingdom. The kingdom his father meant him to have, meant him to claim, meant him to rule. Instead all he had were his uncle’s promises that he would rule when he was ready. *Ready how?* he wanted to yell. What must he say? What must he do to show his uncle that he was ready? What did it take to be king? Curling his hands into fists he lifted his gaze from below.

A gentle squeeze answered his thoughts and Komoro looked back down at the hand on his shoulder, smiling at his uncle to show he understood, before crossing his own arms over his chest as he looked back down the rock-face. *What did it take?* His gaze

moved swiftly to the right as he surveyed his uncle from the corner of his eye. *It would be so easy...*

*So easy.* And who would dare question him on the matter? It was growing darker already, the sun just a heartbeat away from beginning its slow descent behind the sand in the distance as it set. And they were so high up, having climbed until his legs felt as though they would give like a newborn colt; even he had questioned why they were going so far up. Perhaps he could explain how his uncle was senile and accidentally fell on his own, not paying attention to where he tread on the plateau? Or maybe his uncle did it on purpose, just after telling Komoro of the beauty of the spot, his wishes for his burial and his certainty that his nephew would be a great ruler. Even a gust a wind would do it. It would be an easy explanation to Sao officials who often came across winds stronger than an elephant pressing a young sapling aside. Winds that stole heavy blankets, pushed chariots speeding along the sand, and lifted heavy pottery from the ground. The way his uncle stood so close to the edge with not a care in the world...made it so tempting. Even the guards wouldn't be able to prove it, one way or the other.

*But his sister.* Ketemin was so fond of their uncle. She'd shared his love for science and metallurgy, entering the good graces of every tutor he and his sister ever met. She was the ideal pupil. Every answer she received was followed by another question, desperate to know exactly *how* and *why* each thing *was*. Lessons about their trade became something she thrived on, creating new methods for the Kingdom of the Sun to gain ground with their neighbors and establish alliances. And their uncle sometimes taught them himself, though Ketemin never allowed their lessons to end while Komoro escaped before his uncle called him back to continue. His eyes always stayed on the water clock. Ketemin's eyes stayed on their uncle. Ever since their father died she treated their uncle as though he was their father. But he wasn't. And he never would be. She would never forgive him if she found out. But then, he could always make sure she didn't.

"Komoro," his uncle said gently, interrupting his thoughts. "I love you as a son. I always have." His uncle was looking at him now with an earnestness he'd never worn before. "I know you've taken your father's death harder than anyone and I know I am no replacement for him. But I hope to be there when you need me.

Whenever you need me. Even when you become king. I'll help you make decisions if you need my counsel. There may come a time when I am no longer...here. And I hope you will remember everything I taught you. You will have to make hard decisions at times. But they are necessary. And the outcome will always be worth it."

Komoro nodded, finally placing his right hand on his uncle's shoulder. "You're right. I will have to make hard decisions, uncle." Squeezing his uncle's shoulder gently, he allowed his eyes to travel over the old man's face, memorizing the strong jaw and clear eyes that sat within smooth, rich, earthen skin. "I understand now." He made sure his grip was firm and squeezed it one last time. *Decisions are always hard.*

"Your Grace!"

Komoro jumped, turning with his uncle towards the guard as he pulled his hand back in alarm, heart racing in his chest.

"Your Grace, forgive me, I thought you heard me. A sandstorm is coming."

At that, the escort turned and pointed behind them. In the distance, thick clouds of sand mushroomed towards the sky, stretching across the land as though it needed more room. A herd of oryx ran from it, their curved horns like branches of scimitars sprouting from their white coats, birds circling above them as though to land at the earliest convenience. More than one vulture would have food soon if the storm grew bolder.

"Come, Komoro. I have seen all I need to today." His uncle smiled and followed the guard.

Komoro turned back towards the edge as the winds began to whip at his shendyt, the camels clearing away from the oasis as though they sensed what was coming from the growing winds. His uncle's retreating back dipped lower and lower as he descended. Animals could always tell when danger was near. But could his uncle?

When they arrived back at the palace he walked up the steps with his uncle.

"Remember, Komoro, if kingdoms wish to move quickly, they must go alone. If we wish to go far, we must go together."

Komoro stroked the stubble of his beard, thinking for a moment. *He still treats me like a child who only wants for a playmate,* he thought. *Yes, would that my father was alive to see how you've*

*grown old and useless, clinging to ancient customs while pretending to embrace progress.*

“Uncle, forgive me,” he replied slowly, kneeling near the old man’s hand. “We will go. I should not be so hasty to flout tradition.”

His uncle smiled proudly, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Rise, Komoro. It is already forgotten. I don’t think you will be so disappointed when we arrive. Princess Imani is the picture of beauty, with the eyes of a lioness and bewitching. I dare say she will tempt you to change your mind.”

“I doubt she’s so beautiful as to tempt me. I’m sure there are better options.” *Regardless, whatever would the harem think should I return with a bride, wedded and bedded without one last farewell,* he thought smiling.

“Reckless. The man who does all his thinking below will soon lose what he should have cherished more above.” His uncle shook one finger at him as a warning. “Women are fickle.”

“And doubtless, so is the Princess—”

“No. She is a bright star in a time of uncertainty; beautiful, intelligent, a virgin bride for whomever would win her hand. Take care you don’t take up with the local harems, Komoro. Talk spoken in darkness always comes to light.”

*So you spy on me too old man.* “Yes, Uncle,” he replied. “Sleep well.”

Komoro took his leave, his robe sweeping across the limestone floors as he went to his bedchamber. He threw his headdress on the ground, pulling a black cloak over his head and placing a pouch full of gold in his pocket, rushing into the night as the sun dipped low, barely peeking out behind the hills in the distance.

The guard nodded to him when he placed gold in his outstretched hand. He could hear the drums and the sand rattles making a soft tune. Laughter drifted through the quarters. The noble who lived here was celebrating his youngest’s birthday. He wouldn’t miss his wife too soon. He didn’t need much time. Incense was burning, tickling his nose gently, and causing his mouth to water.

“Welcome, my Prince. She’s through here,” a veiled woman whispered in his ear.

When he turned, his eyes met those of a familiar acquaintance. The handmaid’s dark eyes smiled at him even as his eyes traveled

to the tips of her dark nipples, her breasts clearly visible against the yellow silk dress she wore, a slit opened to reveal her right upper thigh. She smelled of lavender.

She offered him water, holding a silver gourd up, "*Aman, Your Grace?*"

"No." He shook his head and moved past her.

"Saai awaits your pleasure," she said gesturing down the candlelit hall. Nodding to her, he turned towards where she pointed.

He pulled back a thick black veil in anticipation. She was waiting for him in the depths of the bath, her hair pulled atop her head. Seeing him, she rose, water trickling down her full breasts to her navel, gathering at the opening of her thighs. She walked to the red-dyed furs in the room, sinking to her knees before turning back to him. *Her husband has never known her like I've known her.*

"My Prince, my Prince. It's been too long," she said softly, her hair tumbling down her shoulders as he raked his fingers through the dampness.

Running his hands along her spine, he knelt behind her, his cloak and robe falling away in one fluid motion. She gasped as he gripped her hair tightly closing his eyes at the same time.

He knew what would happen if he was discovered. Well. *She* was discovered. He couldn't be touched. But he so enjoyed touching her. And she wasn't the only one. Was it his fault if married women enjoyed the pleasure of his company? He stood, dressing quickly while she was still asleep. If he woke her, she would beg him to stay. Married women were supposed to be the easiest to let go of, but she clung to him like sap to a tree.

Pushing a back door open, he left quickly, moving through the winding streets of the city. The door to his chambers had barely closed before he heard a heavy knock and turned quickly. *Had someone seen him?*

"Your Grace, if I may have a word?"

Komoro sighed. All he wanted was a bath. He walked to the door, intent on railing at the lateness of the hour. *What does he want now?*

"You realize that—"

"Your Grace, I think she knows." The Chief Treasurer said gravely.

“What? What are you talking about?” he asked, closing the door behind him. *The man is unhinged.* He watched the treasurer pace up and down his chambers like a nervous baboon, his fists clenching and unclenching as he talked.

“Princess Ketemin. She asked to see me earlier today about *the state of affairs* and I could not say no!”

“What did you tell her?” Komoro grabbed the man to stop him from moving.

“I could not say no! I – I told her of course we could speak; I was however wanted on business and would not be back until late. She said tomorrow would do just as well.”

Komoro released him. “Well then, it’s not urgent. Find your manhood, Odwulfe.” The man was losing it, and quickly. He realized he needed to reassure the man and give him a plausible story.

“Tell her I ordered you to divert extra money to some of the farmers to compliment their drought. If she says there is in fact more money, then tell her we renegotiated agreements with some of the traders. She won’t ask you too many questions.”

“Yes, but which ones? Your sister is highly capable, and she’s smart. She’ll know which ones to ask about.”

“Smarter than me, is she?”

Odwulfe gasped as he realized his mistake and took a step back. “I did not mean *that*, Prince Komoro. I only meant, she never gives up; she may try to catch me in a lie.”

“Don’t worry. I will deal with my sister. If she asks more questions. tell her only that she is to speak with me.”

“Yes, Your Grace. And what of the morning’s caravan? We are sending one north in the morning with the salt gathered this week.”

“And...”

“We need guards to see it north.”

“How does that concern me at this time?” Komoro was growing irritated. It had been a long night and he needed his rest. Sitting in the chair on the dais near his bed he yawned. The carvers built it so that he could take meetings in the comfort of his own room, but still let others know his position. It would not do for them to become too comfortable with him.

“You...we...removed a number of guards from the salt mines for other...purposes...so we don’t have that same number to see

it north. Shall I divert some from the other guards around the palace?”

“No. Leave it. It’s always been safe before. Who would have a mind to steal salt deep in the desert? And in the heat of the desert I have no idea who would even attempt to make that journey. I can barely stand to be outside for more than three hours at a time. It will be fine with the number we have, which is...” He raised his eyebrows questioningly when he didn’t receive an answer from the treasurer.

“Four, Your Grace. For two hundred camels...” The treasurer’s voice trailed off hopefully as he held the scroll in front of him.

“Four it is then. I’m sure you will take care of it. Arm them with extra weapons if it comforts you. Make sure they send a report when they reach Timbuktu or Gao. Whichever one it is.” Waving Odwulfe away as he spoke, he rose, walking towards his bed.

“Yes, Your Grace. Sleep well, Your Grace.”

Stretching onto the bed as the door closed, he reminded himself he needed to go see the salt mine in the morning as well. Soon, he would be king. Soon, he would be as the Sao were, giants among men. Yawning he relaxed further to sleep. He needed his rest. *It will be difficult work being King.*



# IMANI

“You can follow me, or you can run and tell my father. I have no feelings on the matter,” she told him.

Shaharqa looked at her in exasperation, his face contorting with a mixture of fury and desperation as he tried to work out the best course of action, knowing she might disobey him regardless. He was built like a rhinoceros, his broad shoulders supporting massive arms and a tapered waist, a trunk that people knew better to go around than attempt to cut down. He crossed his arms over his chest, dark eyes narrowing at her.

Imani smiled as he glared at her. *He'll do no such thing, and I'll be halfway towards the coast before he finishes the conversation with my father.*

She'd followed them at a short clip from the time they'd left the palace. Now she stood toe to toe with Shaharqa as he towered over her, his shadow blocking the sun from her face. She pulled the comb from her hair before snatching the tight black curls back into three thick braids that hung down her back, using three bands to hold them tightly at the ends. Taking the gold-plated half circle crown from the top of her horse as he pushed his nose into the small of her back, she pressed it backwards into the top of her hair. Fitting snugly to the shape of her forehead it would protect her from temple to temple and from her crown to the bridge of her nose. Stroking the stallion gently she admired his gleaming kohl coat and ivory legs. Powerful and strong, his muscles flexed underneath her fingers as he nudged her side.

“Imanishakheto...He ordered you to stay at the palace. Once he sees you it will not go well for you.”

“Don't worry, Uncle. I'll tell him myself,” she assured him as she dropped the reins on her stallion. “You have my word. But the longer we wait...”

Shaharqa's jaw flexed as she watched him, eyebrows raised. “Promise me you will stay out of sight.”

“Am I meant to keep it? You once said I had the fastest draw you'd ever seen. *You* said it rivaled father's.”

# OF CAPTIVITY & KINGS

The laws are different in the Kushite ruled Kingdom of Nabara. The penalty for involvement in the slave trade is death, and if the King fails to provide justice and order under ma'at, the High Priests can order him to commit suicide. When a Roman slave ship wrecks off the coast of Nabara, peace is shattered. Ancient caravan routes and nomadic families are threatened by kidnappings, robbery, and murder, forcing Nabaran High King Amkar Kashta to invoke the power of the six-kingdom alliance that is Nudolla. Each member of the ruling families finds themselves thrust into the rising slave trade and the corruption of everything and everyone it touches.

It is an adventure told from the secret sanctuaries of the Desert Fathers in the Scetes and the massive pyramids of the Kingdom of Meroë, to the Skeleton Coast and over the Great Barrier Mountains of Apedemak. Here, kings and queens, princes and princesses, slave traders and gladiators, high priests and slaves, scribes and warriors, caravan robbers, and hermits collide under the thread that links them all - Captivity and Kings.

**E. Y. LASTER**