

SHADOWS OF ASPHODEL

by Karen Kincy

Shadows of Asphodel – copyright © 2013 – Karen Kincy

Second edition

All Rights Reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced without written permission from the author.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead (or any other form), business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

*To my beta readers,
for championing a diamond in the rough.*

1913

ONE

Ardis trudged across the blood-churned earth, blinking as the wind whipped spindrift snow into her eyes. Her arm ached, but she kept a good grip on Chun Yi, her sword. Above, the drone of zeppelins heralded the advance of the medics who would decide the fate of the men and women lying broken on the ground. Ardis tugged her scarf over her nose, trying not to gag at the stench of diesel and blood.

She should hurry. She couldn't see the height of the sun behind the clouds.

The battle was over, but a storm was coming.

Ardis walked quietly among the wounded, giving distance to rebels in their ragtag uniforms. Her enemies looked helpless, but she could hear their groans and prayers. Her fingers tightened around the sharkskin hilt of Chun Yi, and she hoped —

Movement.

Ardis spun with her sword ready and saw a man stagger to his feet. His mane of black hair flew in his face, hiding it, and his ragged breath fogged the air. He didn't look like a soldier or a rebel, dressed in a fine coat of gray wool and wolverine fur, matted flat with blood. His hands hung empty at his sides.

What was a gentleman like him doing on the battlefield?

The man cleared his throat, clenched and unclenched his hands. "I'm unarmed."

His words were at once smooth and rough, a honey-gravel voice. He spoke German without any trace of an accent.

“Hands on your head,” Ardis commanded.

The man did as she said, and the wind blew his hair from his face. Ardis had to stare.

He was starkly handsome, with an arrogant elegance only gentlemen have. Dark slivers of eyebrows, cheekbones so sharp you could cut yourself on them, and eyes exactly like those of a snow leopard, a stunning pale green.

A thin smile tugged at the man’s lips. “How are you going to kill me?”

She kept her face blank. “I haven’t decided yet.”

“I would prefer your dagger,” he said. “It looks sharp.”

“Sword,” she said.

“Ah. My apologies.”

Ardis narrowed her eyes. She couldn’t believe how glib he sounded, like they were in a fencing match and he had nearly lost.

No, not nearly. If he was unarmed, as he said, then he was her prisoner.

Prisoner? Damn.

Ardis had never taken one of the enemy alive before. It had always been kill or be killed, but he wasn’t making this easy by acting so vulnerable. Now she would have to shackle him somehow and march him back to camp. Well, he was a gentleman, so perhaps there would be a hefty ransom involved, and she—

“My name is Wendel,” he said.

Ardis squinted at him. The battlefield seemed like an odd place for introductions.

"Thank you," she said. "I will make sure it goes on your grave."

He laughed, then clutched his ribs. His hand came away red with blood.

"You're wounded," she said.

"Very observant." Wendel wasn't looking at her now, and pain sharpened his voice. "I might die before you kill me."

He laughed again, despite himself, and coughed up a spattering of blood in the snow.

Ardis frowned, her fingers even tighter on Chun Yi. She could let Wendel bleed out, but that might not be quick, and she would have to watch the whole thing. Or she could try to salvage him and collect that hypothetical ransom.

Wendel swayed on his feet. "May I sit?" he said. "I don't think I can..."

He fell to his knees in one swift movement, like a glacier cracking, then crumpled on his side. He reached out, his fingers splayed, and grabbed a fistful of snow as if to claw himself upright. A war dog's stiff corpse lay nearby, its blood melting the snow where Wendel had fallen. Wendel's fine coat was altogether ruined now.

Ardis watched him, her jaw taut, and tried to make up her mind. "How bad is it?"

Wendel didn't look at her. "Bad enough."

She sheathed Chun Yi, her muscles shaking with fatigue. He reached out again, groping blindly, and his hand closed on the war dog's paw.

"All right," Ardis said. "I'm taking you—"

Wendel shuddered, and the dog kicked its legs. Adrenaline jolted into Ardis's veins. She drew Chun Yi and stepped into a defensive stance. The dog climbed to its feet, its ruined throat gaping, and growled at her.

No breath fogged the winter air.

Ardis braced herself as the dog charged. Its paws thudded in the snow, its fangs glinted in the overcast sun. The dog veered for her left arm, jaws wide, and she dodged right. The dog remembered its training and spun, nimble for such a huge mastiff—for such a *dead* mastiff. She retreated, blocking the dog with her sword.

The dog leapt high, aiming for her throat, and she brought Chun Yi up to meet him.

With gritted teeth, she sliced through the dog's thick neck and beheaded it cleanly. The animal crashed into the snow, dead again.

Ardis's heartbeat raced. She wiped the blood from her blade.

"Well," Wendel said. "It was worth a try."

She turned to face him, but didn't stand so close this time. Wendel huddled sideways on the ground, his teeth chattering, clearly weaker for having used some of his magic. A widening bloom of blood stained the snow.

"A necromancer?" she said.

There was something remarkably similar to fear in his eyes, but he smiled.

"Yes," he said.

Wendel's eyes flickered shut, and he collapsed in the snow. She edged closer to him and nudged him with the flat of her blade. This

could be another trick, though she doubted it. If she were lucky, maybe he was already dead.

Ardis sheathed Chun Yi and looked down at him, waiting.

She crouched beside him and felt for a pulse in his neck. There, beneath her fingers, a faint heartbeat thumped. He was still handsome, even unconscious, even covered in filth and blood. His skin felt warm and soft enough, like any other person's. Not like a necromancer's. She shuddered and wiped her hand on the snow.

The burning cold almost erased the feeling of having touched an abomination.

~

Ardis waited for the medics to come. The necromancer lay still and silent in the snow, but he was alive; she held Chun Yi near Wendel's mouth and waited for his breath to fog the blade. She wouldn't touch him again, not unless necessary.

You didn't want to kill a necromancer. If you killed him, he would come back ten times stronger. If you killed him, he would lose the last traces of his humanity and become a monster that mercilessly hunted you down in revenge.

That's what Ardis had heard, though she had never seen a necromancer before.

She didn't want to risk him dying.

Wendel was still breathing at her feet, but he wouldn't last much longer bleeding like that. She scanned the battlefield and saw the medics in their beige uniforms, trudging toward the wounded with backpacks of medical supplies.

Ardis raised her arms above her head. "Over here!"

A medic glanced at the others, then broke into a trot. He was a twitchy man with wide eyes behind his glasses, and he wasn't much older than her, at most in his late twenties. When he saw Wendel, he instantly got to work.

Ardis watched the medic strip the necromancer's ruined coat and shirt. A narrow wound ran from Wendel's left shoulder across his chest. She judged that a blade must have slashed across his ribs without slicing much deeper, so Wendel had a fair chance of surviving. If he stopped bleeding. If his wound healed cleanly.

And if the medics didn't know he was a necromancer.

"Did you do this?" the medic said, with a thick Hungarian accent.

Ardis blinked. "What?"

The reflection in the medic's glasses hid his eyes. "Did you wound this man?"

"No," she said, "but he's my prisoner. I want his ransom."

The medic made a grunt of disapproval. Medics were impartial, healing both friends and foes, but this was in theory. Ardis doubted they would keep treating a necromancer, if they knew, unless they also feared him dying.

She felt her stomach tighten into a knot. She would have to protect him now.

"How long ago was it?" the medic said, clearly impatient. "The wound?"

Ardis frowned. "I don't know. I just found him here."

The medic swore under his breath. "Then he must have walked here. He's missing a lot more blood than what's on the ground."

"Fix him," Ardis said.

The medic ignored her.

She sighed and sat on a nearby boulder. Snowflakes started drifting from the sky. They fell on Wendel's face and melted, slowly, as if his skin was growing colder. The medic finished bandaging him and stood.

"Shouldn't we move him somewhere warmer?" Ardis said.

The medic glowered at her. "Listen," he said. "This isn't your job. If you didn't damage so many people I wouldn't have so much work. So if you want to help, be quiet and do as I say. We need to move him out of here. All right?"

She nodded, her face impassive. She was used to taking orders.

~

Ardis rested at the edge of camp, toying with a talisman. It wasn't much more than a twist of horsehair rope and a piece of wood painted with a blue-and-white eye. The medics had hung the talismans around the perimeter of camp to ward off evil. Clearly the superstition had done nothing to stop the necromancer.

She climbed to her feet and walked back to the tent where they had taken Wendel.

It had been two hours since she had last seen him, but the medics hadn't let her inside the tent. They had important work to do, they said, in a tone that invited no argument. Surely by now they had patched him up, and she could see him.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" said a medic-in-training, a reedy woman with suspicious eyes.

Ardis wasn't sure whether to be insulted or flattered by the "ma'am," so she put on a face that she hoped seemed friendly. "I'm here to see a man."

"A man?" The woman thinned her lips. "Who?"

Ardis opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again. She hadn't told them his name. Would it be a giveaway? Necromancers *were* rare. Very rare.

"He's... he's pale," Ardis said. "Long black hair. Green eyes."

The woman shook her head and riffled pompously through papers on a clipboard. "I'm sorry, we don't keep lists of physical attributes."

Ardis sighed. "I'm going in to look for him."

"I'm afraid you can't—"

"I *brought* him here." Ardis sidestepped past her and entered the tent.

Inside, faint light filtered through the canvas of the tent, supplemented by kerosene lamps. She wrinkled her nose at the stink of sickness and disinfectant. The wounded lay on makeshift cots, wrapped in bloody bandages, many of them lost in an opium haze that dulled their pain. A patient near her shrank back, whispering a fearful prayer, and she knew he must be a rebel. As if she would murder him in a place of healing.

There were only about a dozen cots in the tent, not all of them full. Ardis circled the tent, looking for the necromancer's face.

He wasn't here.

Ardis's throat tightened, and she took a steadying breath. She should never have left him. Maybe he had died from so much blood loss after all, and they had taken his body away already. But

they didn't know he was a necromancer. How soon would he rise from the dead and come looking for her? Or... had he escaped?

Yes, he could have slipped from the tent. Maybe he was stronger than he looked.

She strode out, a sour taste in her mouth, and flagged down the reedy medic-in-training.

"Did any patients leave in the past two hours?" Ardis said.

The woman stared at her. "I don't see why I should tell—"

Ardis shook her head and brushed past the medic-in-training. She would have to look for Wendel herself. She marched toward the perimeter of the camp, where the talismans twirled in the wind, and looked for footprints, blood, anything. Her tracking skills weren't her strongest suit, but she would be damned if she lost the necromancer.

The sky above her darkened, and the wind died to a deceptive calm.

Ardis circled the camp twice before she saw a scrap of black in the whiteness. She cut across a snowy field, pushed past the whippy branches of willows, and came upon an ice-choked river. There, on the bank, was Wendel.

He had his back to her, and she crept closer to him, her hand on Chun Yi's hilt.

What was Wendel doing? He wasn't wearing a shirt, and she saw the pale skin of his back, and the bandage wrapped around him. He knelt at the riverside, reaching into the water, his shoulders flexing as he moved. She sidestepped through the willows to get a better look. He dipped his hands into the river and

scrubbed them together, meticulously, shook the water from his fingers, and then did it all again.

She stepped forward, her boots crunching the snow. "Wendel."

He glanced at her, apparently not startled, and clenched his hands. "Yes?"

"What are you doing?"

"Washing my hands."

Ardis frowned. "That water must be freezing. And you lost a lot of blood."

"Concerned?" He held his hands up to inspect them. "Should I be touched?"

She sneered at him. "I didn't drag your lifeless body all the way back to camp just so you could die of hypothermia."

Wendel stood, drying his hands on his trousers. "I can't stay here."

"You're my prisoner."

He picked at a bandage in the crook of his arm, where they must have given him a blood transfusion. A clay amulet hung around his neck—for Aceso, the Greek goddess of healing—and he tugged it over his head and tossed it into the snow.

"I saw the slash on your ribs," Ardis said. "You still need that amulet."

Wendel shrugged. "I don't believe in that brand of magic."

Ardis clenched her jaw. "Just necromancy?"

He looked at her, his strange eyes catching the light of the fading sun.

"Yes," he said.

Silence stretched between them. Ardis ran her thumb over the tassel on the pommel of Chun Yi, the familiar feeling a comfort. Wendel stood watching her, his face inscrutable, his raven-dark hair stirring in the wind.

Wendel took a slow breath, twisted his mouth, then got down on one knee.

“You saved my life,” he said. “I swear fealty to you until the debt is repaid.”

TWO

Ardis's heartbeat thudded in her ears. The necromancer's words sounded formal, like he had memorized them from a book. She stared at him until she found his eyes unnerving, and she glanced away to the snow.

"Fealty?" she said. "To me?"

She had never been promised life-or-death loyalty before. By anyone.

Wendel nodded, and his jaw tightened.

"No." She backed away from him. "Don't do that."

He stayed kneeling. "I already did."

"No!" Ardis growled the word. "You're a necromancer."

Wendel sighed, and she saw him bite his tongue. "And?"

"You can't come with me. I—I have work to do."

"Right." He all but rolled his eyes. "Back to business killing for the highest bidder. I can help, you know. I'm good at killing."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

A corner of his mouth curved. "Out of curiosity, why did you save me?"

Because she was afraid to let him die, but he didn't need to know the truth.

"To ransom you," she said. "You must come from a rich family."

"Ah." He curled his lip. "Sorry to disappoint, but there will be no ransom."

She was afraid of that, and afraid her face betrayed her intentions.

"They haven't seen me since I was eleven years old," he said, "and they certainly wouldn't pay for me to come home."

"But you have superiors, don't you?" she said. "They must want you back."

All the emotion went from Wendel's face.

"They do," he said.

"Then they will pay your ransom."

Wendel's face remained cold. "You don't know, do you? About them?"

Ardis shook her head. There was no use lying.

"I see," he said, and he looked away. "They won't pay you. Kill you, yes."

She squared her shoulders. "Enlighten me."

"You may have heard of them as the Order of the Asphodel."

"I haven't. Who do they fight for?"

"Themselves." Wendel's mouth curled into something between a sneer and a smile. "They come from Constantinople, though they claim to be older than the Ottoman Empire itself, and will likely outlast it at this rate."

"Constantinople," she repeated. She had never been there.

"Yes." He met her gaze again, his eyes glinting. "You're a mercenary? A sellsword?"

She assumed it was obvious, since she wore no uniform. "What do you think?"

"Who do *you* fight for?"

Ardis straightened her jacket's lapel and showed him a golden flower pin—an edelweiss, the mountain blossom of the Alps.

"Oh, the Archmages of Vienna?" Wendel arched an eyebrow. "My compliments on the Hex. Really keeps these rebels in line. Though the Transylvanians have a knack with scythes." He gestured at his wound.

She winced. "I'm not an archmage. I'm here as a peacekeeper."

"A peacekeeper?" He loaded the word with scorn. "Is that what they call it now?"

She shrugged, not taking the bait. "Just doing my job."

"The last time I checked, the Ottoman Empire and Austria-Hungary were allies. Which means, conveniently, we're allies."

Ardis narrowed her eyes. "Right."

"I'm coming with you."

Her smile was frosty. "As my prisoner."

Wendel returned her smile, and his was even icier. "Fine," he said, "so long as you don't waste your time trying to ransom me."

She scoffed. "Prisoners don't give orders."

He stared at her, his jaw taut, and his fingers curled into fists. He was angry. Good. She knew angry. She could work with that.

"If I tell you to kill someone," she said, "will you do it?"

He nodded.

"Anyone?"

He nodded again, and his mouth twitched. "Though I prefer to work with the dead."

She made a neutral noise in the back of her throat. "Then get up. We're going."

Wendel winced as he climbed to his feet, and for a half-second Ardis offered her hand to help him stand. But her disgust got the better of her and she crossed her arms. He pressed his hand over his ribs, then swore under his breath.

"I told you to keep that amulet," Ardis said.

"I'm all right," he said, "it just hurts like a bitch."

Ardis turned her back on him, to prove she wasn't afraid, and started walking. "Keep up, or I'll leave you behind."

"Why the hurry?" he said, following her. "The battle is over."

"The rebellion isn't. Transylvania is still crawling with peasants armed with pitchforks." She glanced sideways at him. "And scythes."

"Almost makes me miss guns." Wendel sighed. "I was a good shot, you know."

She snorted at his bravado and kept walking.

He hurried to catch up. "Where are you going?"

"I'm done here. I need to return to Vienna."

"Vienna," he said. "That sounds good to me."

"You don't get an opinion."

That provoked a hint of a smile out of him. "Do I get your name?"

"Ardis," she said, and for some reason she found it hard to meet his eyes.

They crossed the field together. A bitter wind stung Ardis's skin and flung her hair into her eyes. She stopped, frowning, and braided her hair over her shoulder. Wendel studied her face, and her fingers felt clumsy under his gaze.

"Where are you from?" he said.

Ardis stared at her braid. She never thought her hair was very remarkable, though it was probably the contrast that made him curious. She had tawny lion-colored hair, unmistakably Chinese eyes, and skin a shade or two darker than his.

"I'm from America," she said. "I'd rather not get into long and boring genealogy."

Wendel arched his eyebrows. "Oh, I'm sure your genealogy isn't boring."

"If you think that's flattering, it's not. And you're wasting your time trying to flatter *me*." She gave him a look. "Prisoner."

He laughed, then doubled over, his hair in his face.

Ardis sighed. "Are you sure you can walk? You're half dead."

He gave her a pained smile. "Not half dead. Only a quarter dead." He gingerly rubbed his side. "That bastard must have cracked my ribs."

She shook her head. "That would hurt much more. You wouldn't be laughing at all."

"I take it you have experienced cracked ribs before?"

"You shouldn't be travelling," she said. "You should stay with the medics."

Wendel's face went emotionless again. "No, thank you."

Ardis continued walking. Her feet ached, and she could do with a drink before hitting the road. The necromancer matched her stride. Ardis was tall, but Wendel was at least a few inches taller than her. She studied the lean muscles in his torso and the length of his limbs. He would likely have the advantage of reach in a fight, if nothing else.

"You need a shirt," she said. "And a coat."

“Ah, well, I ruined mine.” He glanced sideways at her. “Were you staring?”

Her cheeks warmed. “You’re very pale.”

“Blood loss will do that to a man,” he said. “That, and an inability to tan.”

Ardis bit back a smile.

Wendel stopped halfway across the field and shaded his eyes with his hand.

“I lost my dagger out there,” he muttered.

He hurried toward the edge of the battlefield, or hurried as well as he could, limping and holding his side. Ardis sighed and followed him. She supposed it was a good idea to let the necromancer have his weapon back. It wasn’t like she could stop him from raising the dead. That was touch magic, skin-to-skin.

Wendel stopped next to a Transylvanian soldier in a bloodstained blue uniform. The man had died fairly recently, from the looks of it, but the snow had already begun to bury his body. Beside him lay a scythe with a wicked blade.

“I don’t see any dagger,” Ardis said.

Wendel’s eyes sharpened. He crouched beside the man and studied his face.

“He would know,” he said.

“What?” she said.

Wendel was ignoring her. He laid his hand on the soldier’s neck, then blew out his breath. All the muscles in Wendel’s shoulder and arm tensed.

The soldier blinked his unseeing eyes, and sat upright.

Ardis unsheathed Chun Yi, her nausea peaking. "What are you doing?"

Wendel didn't let go of the man, and his face was etched with concentration, or pain.

"Where is my dagger?" he said.

The soldier's blue lips moved, and a gurgling noise came from his throat. He wasn't breathing; or perhaps the air moving through his lungs was as cold as the winter sky. He stared at Wendel with clouded eyes.

"You remember," Wendel whispered, "I know you do. You tried to kill me."

Ardis's hand clenched tight around Chun Yi.

"The dagger—is by—the tree." The soldier lifted his arm and pointed toward a pine tree. His gaze never left the necromancer's eyes.

"Thank you," Wendel said.

He let go of the soldier, and the man collapsed back into the snow. Dead again. Ardis couldn't help staring at the scythe.

"That was the man who wounded you?" she said, slightly queasy.

"Yes," Wendel said.

He had a disgusted, disdainful look, one she had seen before on the faces of cats. He scooped up a handful of snow and scrubbed his fingers clean. Ardis doubted you could ever forget touching a dead man, but she suspected she knew why he was washing his hands so religiously in the river.

"Was that necessary?" she said.

"Yes," he said, clearly no longer a man of many words.

Wendel climbed to his feet and strode toward the pine tree identified by the undead soldier. He pawed at the snow, then held a blade high—a black dagger with ornate silver engravings of flowers on the hilt.

“Very necessary,” he murmured.

He tilted the dagger so it caught the sun. Ripples swirled through the black metal, the mark of Damascus steel, an art lost centuries ago.

“This is Amarant,” Wendel said. “Do you know what that means?”

“No,” Ardis said.

“Undying.”

She heard satisfaction in his voice, and she was afraid to ask what foul curse imbued his dagger. Ever since the Hex, hundreds of enchanted blades had materialized on the European black market. The Archmages of Vienna had anticipated this, though not the breadth of cruel creativity—a thousand and one ways to die.

Ardis’s hand found Chun Yi again. At least her blade was honest metal.

“It’s late,” Ardis said. “We’re catching the next train out of here.”

Wendel slid his thumb along the flat of Amarant as if polishing away a fleck of blood.

Ardis was tired of waiting, and still nauseated from his little show of necromancy. She began to walk to camp. She didn’t care if she left the necromancer behind on the battlefield. Silence pressed on her ears, broken only by the slow hushing of her breath. The snowfall thickened around her as the wind quickened.

A crow cawed in a nearby pine, and Ardis flinched. Fatigue always frayed her nerves.

Footsteps crunched the snow, running fast, catching up. "Ardis."

Hearing her name in his voice felt odd. Like she should have never given her name to a necromancer. But that wasn't how magic worked, not really. That was just fairytales and nursery rhymes. So why was she still off balance?

"What train?" Wendel said.

"The train in Petroseni," she said. "It leaves in about an hour."

He moved alongside her, struggling to breathe steadily. "We're walking there?"

"No," she said.

Ardis nodded in the direction of camp, shadowed by the zeppelins of the medics.

"We're flying."

~

Wendel leaned against the wall of the zeppelin's utilitarian cargo hold, his eyes closed, as diesel engines powered the airship skyward. Ardis studied him more closely, now that he wasn't looking. He wore a borrowed shirt and black long coat that were slightly too big for him. The sleeves of the coat partly covered his clenched fingers.

"You!" A man whistled at her, like she was a dog. "Can you hear me?"

It was the medic who had cured Wendel on the battlefield.

Ardis narrowed her eyes. "What?"

"Make sure he gets plenty of fluids," he said. "He may need another blood transfusion."

She glared at the medic. "I'm a mercenary, not a nurse."

"I'll do it," Wendel said, without opening his eyes. "I'll get the blood and the whatnot."

The medic took a step back, startled, but recovered quickly. "And apply a fresh bandage to the wound in a few hours."

Wendel opened his eyes a sliver. "Yes, sir."

The medic didn't seem to detect any sarcasm in his voice, so he nodded and walked away.

Ardis glanced at Wendel. She wanted to ask how he was feeling, but she didn't want to sound like she cared, not like *that*.

"I'm fine," he said to her, and he looked into her eyes. "I'm not going to die."

She didn't blink. "Don't. That would be counterproductive."

Wendel's smile was startlingly swift and genuine. He was even more handsome when he smiled, not that it surprised her.

"You Americans," he said. "Always so tactful."

Ardis was aware of her fast heartbeat, but she didn't look away. "Always."

Wendel's smile faded, and she was sad to see it go. Why did someone as bad as a necromancer have to look so good?

"How long of a flight is this going to be?" he said.

"About thirty minutes," she said, "in this weather. Do you hate flying?"

He shrugged. "I'm indifferent to flying." He tilted his head. "Is thirty minutes long enough for me to hear your long and boring genealogy?"

Ardis wrinkled her nose. "Why do you want to know?"

"You intrigue me."

She would have sworn he was trying to charm her, but he wasn't smiling anymore. She wasn't sure how she felt about that.

Ardis fidgeted against the cold steel of the zeppelin, then folded her legs under herself.

"You first," she said.

Wendel let his head fall back against the wall. "I come from a long line of Prussian nobility, but I still managed to inherit bad blood."

Prussian. Well, that explained the flawless German.

"It's inherited? The necromancy?"

He shrugged. "Apparently a great-great-great grandfather of mine had the talent, but he didn't live for long. We rarely do."

Ardis was afraid to ask why.

"You said nobility," she said. "What family?"

Wendel's jaw tightened, and he narrowed his eyes. "They aren't my family now. They disinherited me years ago."

"For being what you are?"

He arched his eyebrows, and she felt stupid for even asking. "Yes."

She wondered if he sounded so bitter because he had been the heir to a great fortune. Prussian nobles were all rich, even younger sons.

“And you?” His voice sounded lighter now, almost bantering. “Your family?”

A knot tightened in her stomach. “My mother came from China.”

“And your father?”

She shrugged. “I never met him. He wasn’t Chinese. Obviously.”

Wendel nodded and glanced at her hair. She felt her cheeks warm, and she wished she didn’t look foreign wherever she went.

“I assume your sword also came from China,” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “It’s called a *jian*.”

Ardis drew Chun Yi halfway and let the light glint off the battered old blade, highlighting the two characters engraved just below the crossguard. She couldn’t read Chinese, but she knew they must be name of the sword.

“These are the characters for Chun Yi,” she said. “Pure Justice.”

Wendel raised one eyebrow with an impeccably sardonic look.

“And how exactly,” he said, “did Pure Justice happen to fall into your hands?”

“Family heirloom,” she said, which wasn’t entirely a lie.

“Heirloom?” His eyes glinted. “Shouldn’t that sword be hanging over a mantelpiece?”

Might as well tell him the truth. It might even intimidate the necromancer.

“It was,” she said. “Until I killed a man with it.”

He laughed, then grimaced. “Don’t make me laugh.”

Wendel’s hand hovered over his ribs. Ardis could see how much it hurt him just to breathe. His lips looked vaguely blue.

"I'm not joking," she said. "I didn't think I could kill anyone until he was dead."

That caught his attention.

"Did he deserve to die?" he said.

She stared fiercely at him. "He wouldn't take no for an answer."

He narrowed his eyes, then closed them and shivered.

"Are you cold?" she said.

His eyes stayed shut. "It's winter. We're all cold."

"Cold from the blood loss." She balled her hands into fists and slid closer to him. "I could get a medic for you now."

Wendel opened his eyes. "Ardis," he said quietly. "The medics have done enough."

"But he was right. You need a new bandage, and—"

"Later."

Ardis started to stand. "Let me—"

The necromancer caught her by the wrist, and his icy fingers shocked her. The fact that he was *touching* her shocked her even more.

"No," he whispered. "They will only ask more questions."

Ardis stared at his hand on her skin, felt the pressure of his grasp on her wrist bones, and her heart drummed in her chest.

"They don't know who you are," she said.

His stare was intense, his eyes vivid with determination.

"It isn't too hard," he said, "for them to find out."

Ardis swallowed hard and glanced around the zeppelin. Nobody seemed to notice them, or the way Wendel's touch was making her feel. She had to pretend it didn't bother her. His hands were strong and slightly calloused. She could imagine they

belonged to a normal man, but she had seen what he had done with them.

“Fine,” she said.

Wendel let go of her, and her skin tingled where his fingers had been. She wanted to rub her hand, but she didn’t want him to see.

“If it bothers you,” he said in a low voice, “my hands are clean.”

Ardis forced herself to meet his eyes. “You know what bothers me.”

Before he could reply, she climbed to her feet and left him leaning against the wall. She busied herself by scanning out the window, though she was only pretending to pay attention to how close they were to their destination.

It didn’t matter how many miles away they were. The necromancer was with her now.

