



Chapter 1

Korva ran. Heavy spring snow clung to her skirts, tangling them around her legs. She pitched forward, landing hard and sliding some distance down the mountain trail.

In the time it took to scramble to her feet the sound of hooves grew to thunder behind her. The imperial soldiers must have seen her fall, because their laughter rang in her ears. To her left was a steep hillside, trimmed around its base with a drift of snow as tall as she was. To her right she saw only the scruffy tops of pine trees and billowing clouds of a late afternoon sky. There was no way but forward, and she would not outrun horses.

With a muffled sob she flung herself down the road again, hitching up her skirts. Not too far ahead now there was a bend, and a little stand of trees. If she could get there...

What? Climb up like a squirrel? Soldiers had axes and bows. They aren't going to be put off by a girl in a tree.

The hoofbeats were so loud in her ears. Did they speak Rahali? Would anything she said move them? Old Dorma had pled on her knees for the life of her grandson, and they were both dead in the snow.

The toe of her boot caught on something hard. She hit the ground again, snow burning her hands when she tried to catch herself. There was another peal of laughter. She pawed at the whatever it was, freeing her foot. It was a stone the size of her hand, frozen in the earth. She clawed at it desperately.

The horses came to a halt, snorting and blowing jets of cloudy breath into the air. One of the soldiers dismounted, freeing his blade. She got to her feet, hugging the stone to herself, stumbling back.

"You were too much trouble, bitch."

It was hard to take her eyes from the sword, with a cry she hurled the stone at him. He batted it away.

"Leave me alone! Please, I never hurt you. Please. What did we do to you?"

The mounted rider cursed. "What a detail this is, slaughtering girls."

The one menacing her grabbed her arm and jerked her toward him.

"You didn't do anything to me. Like a nest of rats, you understand."

He pushed her away. She landed hard on her back and searched for something — a stick, another stone — and found nothing. Sobbing, she hurled lumps of snow at him, squirming onto her hands and knees to crawl away, pulling at her skirt when it caught under her.

There was a grunt, and a shout of alarm. She looked over her shoulder and rolled over quickly, dodging the sword that fell beside her head. The imperial soldier dropped, an arrow placed neatly in one eye. The second soldier gathered his reins, his horse half-rearing. She heard a voice roaring, then a massive form pelted past her.

Masha protect me.

The horse squealed as its rider was pulled off. There were several thumps, ending with a decidedly wet squelch, then silence.

"Girl." A light hand shook her shoulder. She searched frantically for the sword.

"No, no. I won't hurt you."

She looked up cautiously. From beneath a strange helm a pair of dark, shining eyes — *like an otter* — peered at her. He smiled in a friendly way.

"Are you hurt?"

She shook her head. Behind him a big man was standing over the second soldier, one fist turned red.

"Can you climb? A tree, I mean."

She nodded.

"Good. You see down the trail there? There are some trees and such. Find a sturdy one and climb up. Don't come down until I come and get you. Understand?"

"You...you'll come?"

"I promise."

He helped her to her feet. She was tall for a woman, and sturdy besides. He came up to about her ear. It didn't give him pause. He brushed off her skirt and gave her a little nudge, propelling her toward the trees.

The bark snagged at her threadbare skirt, and she heard at least one prolonged tear before she gained a branch strong enough to hold her weight securely.

She knew the sound of feet in snow. Even so, she barely had time to recognise it before a stream of black-clad figures swept beneath her hiding place, moving swiftly up the hill. His helpers? His enemy? Their enemy? Without knowing for sure she held her breath, pressing her cheek against the trunk until they were gone.

A short time later she heard terrible sounds echoing down the valley. She looked towards her village. The empire had started setting fires in their homes and the smoke was still rising fitfully.

What else can they be doing to us?

The grey sky turned over to yellow, and the wind picked up, tugging at her skirt. Her hands, frozen though they were, began to ache from where she'd dug at the ground, and stung from the rough bark. She hadn't had time for her cloak. Now the day that had begun so mildly was growing teeth.

Very slowly she came to realise that she wasn't alone. She had to look twice, so still was the woman who crouched in a tree opposite her. Korva would have sworn she hadn't been there before, yet there hadn't been any sound, either. From the shadows under her dark hood two silvery eyes watched, not unkindly. Korva opened her mouth to scream or to ask a question, not really sure which it would be. The woman lifted her finger to her lips. Korva subsided, heart pounding.

They sat in silence, but for the wind and the whispering trees. After some time she heard desperate panting and pounding feet. Three soldiers pelted down the hill. When they saw their fallen comrades they shouted in alarm. The woman barely seemed to move, but she was suddenly, somehow, ready. When the soldiers passed she looked at Korva, her smile like a knife, and dropped to the ground.

There was a shout, and a particular set of noises. A red streak appeared as if by magic, spraying across the spring drifts. She bit her lip, remembering how the snow of the village had mixed pink.

The woman didn't return to her tree, and the sounds from the village faded. The sky streaked orange and pink, and a vivid colour in between, outlining the mountains as black as night, making her eyes water. It was only when she rubbed them that she realised how tightly she had been holding onto the tree. She had to flex her fingers to make them into something other than claws.

"Girl! Are you here?"

"Here. I'm here."

It seemed like barely a whisper but he appeared under her tree, beaming up at her.

"It's safe. Mostly. For now. Can you get down?"

It was hard climbing down while retaining her modesty, and resulted in another tear in her skirt. He patted her shoulder and strode away. After a befuddled moment she understood that she was meant to follow.

"You come from this village?"

"Yes," she panted, lifting her hem above the snow as best she could. He looked back and stopped.

"Oh, gods! Forgiveness. It's been awhile since I had to wait for someone in a dress." He scratched his head. "Forgot my manners."

They passed the bodies in the snow. She looked at them, embarrassed to find her hands were shaking.

"You did well. Scrappy to the very end. Two soldiers and there you were with a rock."

"I couldn't stop them."

"Maybe not. But you stood up to them. What's your name?"

"Korva."

"Korva. You honour me. I'm Keyad."

"Keyad," she repeated clumsily. "Are you from Gorot?"

"I don't know what a Gorot is."

"The town by the river."

"No, then. I come from the Fedic."

"The next town over?"

He coughed politely. "I'm Zindali. From the south."

"Oh! I think I heard of that. The headman's son might have mentioned a bit about it."

They came to the last curve in the road. Later in the year it would be a pretty sight: the village sheltered under a canopy of green, each cottage and house tucked into its own corner like eggs in a henhouse. The broad stone bridge, already older than the oldest memory, would arch over a tumbling waterfall instead of an icy trickle. Spring was her village's best time.

Now her feet slowed all on their own. The smell of smoke and something worse hung in the air. The otter man noticed her hesitation and gave her shoulder a quick, comforting touch.

"Forgiveness."

"It was..." She sucked in a quick breath. "It must be really bad."

He squeezed gently, so she tried to brace herself for worse even than bad.

The last fires were being put out by weary villagers and the cloaked strangers. Others were gathering up the bodies. Her village was too small for the title of headman to mean much at all, but the old man had been the first to die, and his family had followed, though his son, like Old Dorma's, was off fighting. The big, fancy house that the whole village had all been so proud of was gutted and smouldering. Old Dorma's tidy house was gone, too. There was a smear of red where she'd always laid out her fine garden.

And no one to plant it, now.

The blacksmith's shop was made of stone, so it was still standing, though its shed was fallen in. Fire had touched this place but not that one, almost at random. Just like the swords. She watched strangers carrying a big cloak and a little one: Old Dorma and her grandson. The breath caught in her throat.

"Your kin?"

Korva shook her head. "She was my gran's friend. She was kind to me."

"Is your family here or..." He hesitated.

"Gran died last year. She was the last one."

"And your home?"

She pointed at the tiny wooden shack set against a hillside. Enough stone had been hollowed out to make room for a bed, hearth and workspace, but the roof sagged under the weight of snow.

"Well, it stands. That's some good news."

"Korva!"

Verdin's voice was thick with relief. She watched the forester stride toward her, at once grateful that someone was alive to greet her and perturbed that it was him. He embraced her. She stood stiffly with her arms by her sides until she saw the otter man watching, then gave him a dutiful squeeze in return.

"I saw them go off in pursuit when you fled. I thought the worst." He stroked her hair, something he'd never done before.

He must have been really worried then.

"Who is this?"

When he turned to look at the otter man he stepped in front of her, so she couldn't properly see. She bit her lip and edged around him.

"This is Keyad. He saved me. And more besides, I'd bet."

"Then I owe him a debt for returning you safely."

"None needed. Korva had it well in hand."

She blushed with pride. Even knowing the truth, it was nice to have someone speak kindly about her.

Verdin only chuckled. "She was fleet, it's true."

A knot of people had gathered in the village square. Keyad gave her a quick wink and started toward them. When she made to follow Verdin caught her arm.

"There's no need for you to concern yourself with that. Go help the healer."

"I bet the healer has a lot of hands to help her."

"It isn't your business."

"But...if it's about the village, isn't it important to me, too?"

He looked shocked, and she was a little shocked herself, to speak up. She hurried after Keyad before his grip tightened again. She'd have to work hard to soothe his pride later.

The little crowd of villagers were sooty, many injured and bloody. Some could scarcely contain their sobs enough to listen. At their centre was a tall, slim figure, still cloaked, who was speaking to Getteb. He was the next senior, so he'd become headman from tomorrow. She inched her way toward them.

"They will come back to finish the job." It was a woman's voice, accented a bit like the otter man's. She gestured at the half-ruined village. "If you're here, they'll kill you all and destroy what's left of your homes. If you run, there's a chance they won't bother to burn the empty buildings. Come back in the spring."

"I'm sure you know all about such things, miss. But where'd you have us go? We're poor villagers. All we have left is our winter stores."

Korva's cheeks burned with shame for the woman, knowing exactly how it felt to be spoken to like that.

They should have their leader talk. A man would better be heard.

The woman's eyes swept over the survivors. Korva felt a shiver when they touched on her, black and bottomless.

"You can flee, and survive as you might until the next town, or stay here and die. Look, there are imperial horses left. We'll help you load them with what—"

"It's no good, miss. It's impossible. Us, outrunning trained soldiers?"

Korva tugged on Keyad's sleeve. "Beg pardon, but, is it true? Will they come back?"

He hesitated. "It's happened before."

The woman was arguing again, and there was a sharp edge of frustration in her voice. Korva understood it well enough. There were a few times she wished her mouth was quick enough to answer smart. Getteb was shaking his head with a little smile. The villagers began drifting away, seeing that he'd made his decision.

"Korva, what are you doing?" Verdin was coming for her. She looked at Keyad again, and sidled around Gat the goat farmer.

"We aren't rebellious people. We aren't fighters. This is our home. We have to take our chances here."

"Then it will be your grave."

"Getteb, sir, begging pardon..." All eyes turned to her and she felt her courage curdle. She licked her lips. "Begging pardon. They say they've seen this before. Mayb—"

His hand flew with ease of habit. Pain burst across her cheek. She cradled it, and turned back, eyes down.

"Beg—"

The villagers had fallen silent. A curved dagger was resting so close to Getteb's throat that it dented his skin. He'd gone cross-eyed, looking down at it.

"Do that again."

Korva shivered at the woman's voice: icy and still eager. Verdin's heavy hands came down on her shoulders, attempting to pull her away. She couldn't drag her eyes from it, though.

"It's your own fault. You shouldn't have involved yourself in things that aren't your business."

She shrugged uncomfortably. Keyad was frowning at them.

Another man spoke in some liquid language. The woman sheathed her dagger, though she didn't take her eyes from Getteb.

"Run, and live. Stay, and die like sheep at a slaughter." Her voice was loud enough for everyone to hear. She turned her back on Getteb. The crowd parted for her and her people. She called out orders and they began searching the imperial bodies.

"Come away, Korva. They're barbarians. Zindali and who knows what else."

She touched her painful cheek. Before she could think she darted forward, skidding to a stop before the woman. They stood nearly of a height, but the black eyes made her quail. Korva looked at the smoke rising from the gutted village, the bloody patches, and the shrunken black forms of the dead laid out in their row. She looked at the fearful-eyed villagers, and Verdin's confused face. Then she looked at her hut, where she sewed and mended, and hung the laundry she washed.

She looked down at her hands, always red and raw from grinding work of one kind or another. Her grandmother had been hunched nearly double, and even her mother had begun to stoop before the wasting fever took her, her hands begun their transformation into lumpy claws. If she stayed...

Marriage to Verdin, of an age with her father? Or long years of hard work alone? If they even survived.

And no one to stand at my defence when a fist would fly.

"Take me with you."

Another barbarian, another woman, scoffed. "We don't need village girls."

"You want to fight?" The black-eyed woman's face gave nothing away.

She felt lightheaded, swallowed hard. She had never fought anything before. But...everyone needed mending done, or washing, or cooking. Surely she could make a small place for herself.

"I don't...want to die here."

She didn't smile, but her face wasn't unfriendly, either. "Pack what you'll bring. We won't come back this way."

"Thank you, lady." She bobbed a curtsy, heady excitement filling her up, and a lot of fear besides. "Oh, I'll only be a moment! Don't leave without me! Please."

She dashed off toward her hut, nearly falling when her boots hit a many-times-trodden patch of snow. She shouldered open the door, which stuck every winter when the frost shifted the ground.

There was precious little that she had to bring. She shook out the pack she used for the wash and shoved her few extra bits and pieces of wardrobe into it. Her father's knife and her mother's comb, both reminders of more prosperous days, and her gran's scarf, bought some long ago day in her youth, either in Yrinas or Sistersport, depending on the direction of the wind and the old lady's whimsical mind. Whatever food she had that would fit. She was sure she would have to carry her own burden. Her warm blankets. Her sewing and mending things, of course. And after that, there was nothing left. The room felt no emptier nor more abandoned than it had every day since her gran died.

"You can't be leaving." Verdin filled the door, solid and familiar. He'd been visiting Gran a bit the last few years.

"I don't want to die here."

"You're to be my woman," he said, stepping inside. "Your gran approved."

"She never told me such a thing." She felt only slightly guilty saying so. There had been an *understanding*. She'd known it without being told.

"Even so. If it wasn't for the bad luck of wedding after funeral you might be quickening even now." He smiled. "You shouldn't be afraid. We can go up into the woods where the imperials can't find us. I'll take care of you."

Korva's wild energy gave way to uncertainty. Outside she heard the sound of horses, but no shouts of alarm, so it must be the barbarians. They'd leave, and all there'd be to look at was the bloodied snow where Old Dorma and the others had been cut down. Would she ever look at her village and not remember the places where they'd died? Or was it life alone in the woods, with children clutching her skirts?

Her pack and its paltry collection of belongings slumped on the floor. She looked down at her bruised and torn hands. From her foolish rock. At once her ambition seemed so feeble. What could she offer?

"Come with me. We'll go up into the forest tonight. We'll find a priest when the summer comes."

He'd give her a roof. Protection.

"The barbarians..."

"I'll explain. You were just mad from fear."

His hands were a forester's hands, and clumsy. He didn't mean to bump against her sore cheek. Yet he did, and turned away without noticing her wince of pain.

The barbarian woman hadn't hesitated. It must mean something, that she'd accept me.

She remembered how the blade came to rest against Getteb's throat. Not even a drop of blood. That would be something, that skill.

"Wait. No. Wait. I don't...I don't want to die here."

"I told you. You won't. I'll keep you safe."

"I mean...Not now. And not in fifty years."

She tied her pack closed and lifted it up. It wasn't heavy, but her back was sturdy anyway.

"Korva, no. I won't allow this."

"Begging pardon...begging pardon but...I'm not your wife, Verdin. Not your anything."

He stepped in front of her, blocking the light so that he loomed larger than he was.

"You can't go."

She hesitated. "Well, yes. I can."

He reached for her arm and she stepped back quickly, dislodging her pot from its hook and sending it crashing to the ground.

"Korva?" The otter man poked his head in the door. "If you ride with us, you'd better come."

Verdin scowled and half turned. "Leave us, barbarian."

He looked surprised, and slipped inside.

"Korva, what say you?"

"This is no business of yours."

He ignored Verdin entirely. She could see the forester begin to fume.

"I'm coming," she said, with more hope in her voice than she intended. Keyad grinned, and she thought that he knew exactly how Verdin was annoyed. He picked up her pot, and grabbed her spoon besides. She ought to have packed that, she guessed.

"Come along, then. I hope you can ride."

She stepped quickly around Verdin and followed Keyad. Once free of the door she took a deep breath, feeling lightheaded again. The future was very frightening, but...

"At least it's mine."

Keyad looked at her with a question in his eye and she turned red.

"Korva, come back here! You'll die out there!"

"Your lover is unhappy."

"Oh, he's not. It isn't like that!" She blushed more. "He's just the person I was supposed to marry."

He gave a bark of surprised laughter. "Not a bit cold. So little love?"

"Love's nothing to do with marriage. Begging pardon."

The barbarians were mounting their horses. The woman was arguing one last time with Getteb, trying to talk him over. Korva looked at the stomping, swishing horses, suddenly worried anew.

"Here." The sharp-voiced woman from earlier held out the reins to a big, grey horse. "Take it. Get ready to ride."

She strode off. The horse rolled his eye at her, then chewed, making his bridle jingle. She'd only ever stood near horses before, at the market in Gorot, and once she'd fed a bit of grass to the headman's son's horse.

"Can you ride?"

"Yes. No. Not at all." She saw Verdin's stormy expression. "I'll ride out of here."

Keyad boosted her into the saddle. For a moment she teetered, nearly going over the other side while he adjusted the stirrups and set her feet securely in place.

"He'll follow the rest of the horses. Just try to keep your balance for now." Keyad patted the horse's shoulder and left. She looked at the rider next to her and tried to gather up her reins like he had, gratified when her horse seemed to draw himself to attention, ears flicking back and forth.

"Korva, for the love of all gods get down. You're humiliating yourself."

She moved her leg away from Verdin's touch. The grey obligingly shuffled over.

"Give up, man. You look too desperate," one of the barbarians said, to general laughter.

"You don't belong with these people. They're unnatural."

The barbarian woman's eyes swept over her. Just a look, but she felt unaccountably better. She sat up straighter.

"I'll try to make myself useful, Verdin. Don't worry."

Whatever he would have said was lost to her, because they were moving out, and as Keyad had said, the grey horse was eager to follow.

It was all she could do for some time just to cling to the saddle and not pitch over the side of the mountain. She was very quickly sore in places she had never expected to be sore. It wasn't long before she was gritting her teeth, the leather chaffing through the thin material of her underthings. When they slowed to a walk she tucked her skirts under her for extra padding and rode on.

She was concentrating so hard on ignoring the pain that she didn't realise they'd come to the end of their journey. Only when her horse came to a halt on his own did she look up.

A big, old building clung to the wall of a canyon. It looked like it had been hung there, not built. It made her think of the sturdy keeps and castles and things that had been in Gran's stories. All around the base of it there were lumps and piles of rubble, blanketed by the winter snow. Maybe there'd been a fight there, ages ago. Imagine that; their empty hills were once so important it had needed a whole keep, and an army to defeat it.

The barbarians had brought the ruins to life. Firelight glowed warm through windows, promising comfort within. Not for her, maybe. Not a room or anything grand. Just a place by a fire might be nice, though, to sleep with her blankets. It would be awfully sweet to get warm.

Dark figures were emerging, calling out greetings. She felt a little pang of loneliness. The village could be sparing of kindness sometimes, but Old Dorma...

"But she's gone," she told the horse. His ears swivelled back, listening, and she petted his neck. All around her barbarians were swinging down, chatting with their friends. She attempted to do the same, only to tip over backward. Breath whooshed out of her. She was left staring up at the clear, starry sky, fringed round by trees.

A face appeared, smiling. "Lost your legs?"

"That horse is really tall."

Keyad laughed and helped her to her feet, enthusiastically brushing snow from her skirts. Abruptly he stopped.

"Are you hurt?"

She looked down. Patches of blood had soaked through all the layers, staining her skirts black in the lamplight.

"Beg pardon. I'm not used to riding."

"Aousi! Come take care of this horse for us."

The horse was led away by a pretty man who complained without heat about extra work.

"Beg pardon. I'm all right, though."

He watched her attempt to walk, and she blushed at his amused expression.

"Come on. Our sangiha will help. Our healer."

"Beg pardon, but I don't have any money to pay a healer."

"Don't worry. We'll take care of you."