

Chapter One

Lanna glanced out the window. The thaw had set in, and beads of dew rolled down the glass panes. Each gem of moisture cast tiny rainbows over its surface as the partly obscured sun skipped between the clouds.

‘Misna,’ Ninety-Two’s low city drawl broke through Lanna’s examination of the window. When the Emperor had ordered her into seclusion, Lanna feared days and hours alone spent in never-ending tedium. While it was true they were boring, she was not alone. Ninety-Two, a slave given to her by the Emperor, remained with her during the day. A woman so devoted to Imperial ways she had given up her name.

Not even her thoughts were her own. Lucas lurked in her mind, more than happy to break his own boredom by living through her.

‘The reports should be here soon, Icedancer. Will they be interesting today?’

Lanna snorted at him.

‘Misna,’ Ninety-Two’s tone turned near scolding. ‘Are you listening to me?’

No, she wasn’t listening, but she flashed the young woman a grin. It wasn’t her fault. She didn’t know the multiple conversations that Lanna often held at once. Ninety-Two’s slate-grey locks had grown long and now scraped her shoulders. While in seclusion with Lanna, she could not dye her hair, and her natural black etched a line down the middle of the parting at the top of her head. Her delicate lips pressed together and her dark eyes glittered with contained frustration. She smoothed down her undyed cotton tunic, graceful fingers tweaking away creases.

‘Forgive me – my thoughts wandered elsewhere.’

Ninety-Two nodded, her dark eyes warm. ‘Please don’t apologise. I don’t mean to trouble you, but so much remains to be done.’

With a groan, Lanna looked down at the squat table in front of her. The mahogany surface lay covered with scrolls, parchment and folded vellum. The wedding was imminent and that meant she needed not only Ninety-Two but Frez, Epen and Sonnatha to aid her in making preparations as she couldn't leave seclusion.

A knock sounded at the door. Lanna sat upright, a grin spread over her face, her heart lifting and her blood humming through her veins.

'At last.' She bounced to her feet, grey silks rustling as fabric settled around her legs.

'Misna,' Ninety-Two said. 'Please, you know you're not supposed to answer the door.' The girl dashed past her to block her path, hands out.

Lanna bit her tongue to prevent herself from sticking it out at the slave. With a sigh, she nodded. If Ninety-Two didn't have her way, Lanna would receive another lecture on propriety. Lanna was about to be blessed taking the Emperor as a husband. She must act like an empress.

Yes, she should be oh so grateful, but her heart felt like lead and her stomach churned whenever she considered the wedding. It might take months before the court let her marry Ashioto. She had once thought the negotiations to marry Hemil complex. They were nothing. The ceremony and tradition that arose when the Emperor took a wife was dizzying.

Ninety-Two scuttled to the exit, trotting over the rich reds and browns of the silk carpet, and opened the heavy hardwood door.

'Frez!' Lanna cried out as the shaggy blond head of her retainer and friend poked around the dark wood of the lintel.

'Come, come, what news?' Lanna gestured with both gloved hands. Even in seclusion, no one could touch her skin or risk corrupting her readings. She pointed at the space across from her and switched over to Southern. 'I'm bored with learning about feasting protocol. I'm about ready to boil my head in piss.'

The big man smirked, strolling over to her, his arms filled with more scrolls and scraps of paper. 'I'm going to need an official seer's courier bag if you keep sending me out to gather information.' His ice-blue eyes shone with good humour, the massive bulk of him at odds with the delicate furniture. A large hand swept through his windblown curls, pulling them from round his ears.

'I think you have a future in the Order of Observists,' Lanna said, chuckling at him. Not that he knew that the Order were a facade for spying on the nations of Pler. They were the mechanism of control for the Augmented.

The big man barked a laugh as he dropped his burden on top of what already lay on the table.

'Don't!' Ninety-Two knelt, scooping up samples of silks, scrolls of etiquette and historical documents.

'Epen is also less than impressed that you're using him to gain knowledge on the low city. The foundry smoke affects his chest.'

Lanna lifted a brow. A picture of the tall, stoic man bent over coughing unsettled her. Perhaps she should ask him to work elsewhere? Yet she needed information. An empress must know the realities of the people that lived in the low city and beyond.

'Tell him I'm sorry,' she said in a small voice. 'But this is necessary.'

Lanna scratched at the side of her head – the jewelled cuff clamped over the rim of her ear itched. While in seclusion, her implant was near useless. She didn't care. Should someone assassinate the Emperor, she wouldn't shed a tear. Ashioto deserved everything coming to him, be it an assassin's knife or a fractured nation courtesy of his new wife working against him. This empire was rotten to its maggoty core.

Lanna moved to one side so that Ninety-Two could tidy up a stack of advertisements from pastry vendors in the merchant ring.

‘What news?’ She held out her hands, wiggling her fingers.

‘You really are bored,’ Frez said with a chuckle but handed her the first scroll. Lanna’s eyes flew over the characters before the scroll had even finished unrolling over her forearms. Polished slats of bamboo clicked together as the wood passed through her eager digits and the acrid fumes of fresh ink stung her eyes.

‘The new Department of Progress elected a head?’ she said under her breath.

‘Yes,’ said Frez. ‘A woman called Ami from the fifth province.’

Lanna pursed her lips. The central provinces were the area subjugated a generation ago by the current head of legislature, Ethaan.

‘Well, that will make for lively meetings.’

‘Ami is thought too inexperienced for the role, but the Emperor endorsed her appointment yesterday.’

‘Interesting,’ Lanna said to the scroll as she rolled it up, placing it by her thigh. ‘Next.’

‘Agricultural reports from the southern region.’

Lanna’s heart skipped a beat. ‘Is it bad?’ Swallowing, she took the scrap of parchment from the supple leather bag, looking over the ever-decreasing production figures.

‘Ancestors,’ she breathed.

‘The agricultural department is taking care of mitigation,’ said Frez.

The heat of anger licked through her stomach as Lanna gritted her teeth, biting the inside of her cheek to stop the emotion showing on her face. Yes, she knew how Ashioto and the agriculture department planned on handling the looming disaster. Ignoring villages they didn’t see as worth saving and encouraging starving people to move. Benign neglect, they called it. The village where her family lived would cease to exist if she didn’t do something about it.

‘The freeze still holds the south,’ Frez’s voice rumbled. ‘Thaw is a month late. Reserves almost completely exhausted.’

Lanna forced down the squeeze of panic that threatened to break her poise. What of Eight-Nine-Two? Her parents – and Hemil?

‘Monitor the situation, kinsman,’ she said in Southern. ‘What about the progress of our newest concubine?’

It took all of Lanna’s willpower not to spit the words. Her old friend Mika had travelled to the palace. Another victim of the games Ashioto played to get what he wanted, Mika had been his insurance against Lanna rejecting his offer of marriage. Did he not realise that she would hate him for it? Mika was innocent and sister to the man she had once loved.

‘Once loved?’ Lucas said. *‘I know you still miss him.’*

Lanna squeezed her eyes shut and bit her lip.

Not now, she thought back to him. She didn’t want to remember that carefree time when she’d had everything she wanted within her grasp. Before Chowa ripped her dreams to shreds and brought her to this place of lies.

‘Mika makes progress,’ Frez muttered, his attention fixed on a scrap of parchment, knowing well how awkward the situation was for Lanna. ‘She is in good health and passing through Seventy-Two last I heard.’

‘And who told you that?’

‘Princess Itzander.’

Lanna let the corner of her lips lift. If Itzander said that Mika was safe, she would be. The First Concubine to the Emperor managed a massive information network within the palace.

‘Are you finished yet, Misna?’ Ninety-Two chimed in. ‘We have to decide on attire for your nuptial evening.’

Lanna's stomach dropped to her knees as blood rushed to her cheeks and her heart hammered. Did she have to plan that too? It wouldn't remain on her long if Ashioto had his way. Why bother?

Frez coughed and glanced away.

'It seems you have a good deal of things to do.' And with that, he excused himself.

Oh yes, she had plenty of things still to discuss. What she wanted in her new rooms, whether she should have any furniture commissioned, what kind of table setting could she have at the bridal feast, how many days of feasting would be appropriate, how many hours would officials spend in the festival hall, how many post-nuptial gatherings should there be?

The list went on and on. She failed to care about any of it. This was a sham marriage, but only a select few knew that. While the Emperor was handsome and charming enough to make her pulse race, she had to keep in mind his rotten heart. Attraction was no substitute for betrayal.

'I still say you should leave, Lanna. Set me free and we will get out of here.'

She shook her head slightly. She couldn't go, not when Mika was on her way and not when Eight-Nine-Two was depending on her. Ashioto had her trapped, but her revenge would be to undermine him.

'Do you think you can lie to yourself like that?' asked Lucas. *'You deserve better.'*

'Everything is a lie,' she whispered back at him, careful to dip her head to avoid scrutiny. 'I've had to find my truth. If it's too distorted for your liking then I can only apologise.'

'Don't apologise to me – apologise to the thousands that will suffer if you are successful.'

'And what of the millions that will suffer if I'm not?'

'This is not your fight, Lanna. One person against hundreds of years of tradition cannot hope to win!'

Lanna gave a small smile as she took a sample of material from Ninety-Two, running the cream satin through her fingers.

I intend to prove you wrong, Lucas, she thought back at him.

Chapter Two

One perk of the seclusion house was that it had its own bath – a small cube hewn out of stone. A spigot protruding from the side filled it with hot water. Lanna didn't know where the water came from – having heated water on demand was usually reserved for the Emperor.

Her former mentor, Chowa, was the only other person to have such a system. Many an object in Chowa's workshop used ancient technology; her shower and lights were unique even in the palace.

Water lapped over her body as she sat wiggling her toes in the belly of the stone basin. Her hair had grown down the back of her neck, sticking in wet ribbons over her cheeks and forehead. Rose-tinted steam perfumed the air with a thick floral scent.

Where the bridal house was in the palace complex, Lanna didn't know. They had blindfolded her to bring her to the building. In spying out of the windows, she could see bushes and trees – unkempt ones. The palace rarely suffered any plant to go unmanicured, so having rampant foliage just outside of her window posed a mystery. Could she be beyond the slave quarters? Or perhaps the opposite side of the lake? Forbidden from telling her, Frez and Ninety-Two were no help.

There was a small library at the back of the house, but it contained no maps or any sign of where the building may be. At night Lanna was alone, no one but the stars above to see her.

The evening hours with just herself for company stretched long. Bathing had become a nightly pastime, and her thoughts wandered to places and people left behind.

Where was her brother? She had asked Epen to look for a Southern boy of sixteen with her features, bright blond hair and a brash attitude. Lanna's heart throbbed. She missed him – their arguments, their banter and their awkward companionship. Her mother's blunt wisdom

and her father's compassion left gaps in her spirit. What would Durrick think of her now? What would he say? Would he be proud or disappointed? Would her parents understand what she was trying to do?

Her thoughts turned to Hemil. With Mika's arrival, there would be news of him. She had to brace herself for that and put him behind her. With her goal to force change, there was no room in her heart for him.

'You're thinking too much again,' came Lucas's tired voice. *'It's past midnight.'*

Lanna scoffed, but Lucas's company was welcome, especially when she was alone.

'You don't have to remain awake just because I am. Go to sleep.'

'I spent months asleep, Lanna. I could do without more sleep. The amount of sedatives your precious Chowa pumps into me now have no effect. Were it not for the nanites, I'd be addicted.'

'I'm sorry,' said Lanna in a small voice.

The spigot dripped, ripples rolling towards her knees. Lanna's nose wrinkled as she added rose oil to the water.

'Don't be,' came the soft reply.

'Lucas?'

'Yes?'

'You can see through my eyes, can't you?'

'No, it's more that I intercept what your ocular nerves are—' He paused and then laughed.

'Yes, Lanna, I can see through your eyes.'

She frowned down at herself. *'So you've seen me naked?'*

He burst out laughing. She could imagine him throwing his head back with his hands on his hips.

'You've seen me naked, Icedancer. What's the difference?'

When she had found him in Chowa's lab, he'd been stark naked and surrounded by a garland of wires and tubes that kept him alive for Chowa's experiments. Lanna chased away the disturbing memory. That had been the day he'd started to speak openly to her.

'I don't suppose it matters much,' she sighed, poking at the ridges of muscle on her stomach.

'No,' he said, *'you're the only person I can talk to. I would never abuse that.'*

'You threatened to send me mad.' She folded her arms and glared at the pristine white tiles on the wall.

'You refused to sleep. It hurt. My headache lasted weeks.'

'I was afraid of you.' She stuck her lip out in a pout, voice sour.

'I was afraid that you'd hate me.'

'Sorry about that too.' She wiggled her fingers in the water.

'Goodnight, Lanna.'

'Rest well, Lucas.'

His warmth returned to the back of her mind as he fell silent.

Lanna stood, letting the drips roll off her as she stepped onto a cotton blanket lain over the gorgeous blue-and-white mosaic of the bathroom floor.

She reached for another length of cloth to wrap over her, then pulled the plug from the bottom of the bath. Water gushed out and dribbled down a drain in the middle of the floor.

When she was empress, she was going to demand one of these bathrooms. No slaves involved. Nobody's time taken up to fill the tub. A private indulgence.

Lucas's words haunted her. Could she live a lie?

A knock echoed around the small dwelling. Her blood froze. No one should visit at night. Frez barred the door when he left; she couldn't open it even if she wanted to.

Epen had told her that seclusion used to serve a purpose. After the days of dark, potential contamination from the old weapons could infect people. A few months alone would determine if a bride was healthy and make sure that she didn't carry the child of another.

The knock sounded again, heavier. What was she supposed to do? Tightening the towel around herself, Lanna stepped through the study towards the door at the front of the house.

'Hello?'

Silence.

'Hello?' she said louder, voice wavering.

'It's me,' came a well-remembered smooth baritone. 'I'm coming in.'

Lanna's eyes widened, and her heart rose into her throat.

Ashioto.

Tradition dictated he would come nowhere near the seclusion house until they married.

The skin on her exposed shoulders prickled as she backed away from the exit, standing in the middle of the dimly lit room. One torch guttered in the corner as the door swung open and the Emperor of the Great Northern Empire stepped over the threshold, shattering centuries of Imperial culture as he did so.

Her eyes raked over him from head to toe. Indigo lepus wool swathed his form; the fabric softened his silhouette against the starlit sky. The door closed with a soft click, and her gaze focused on his face. He greeted her with a crooked smile. She resented the warm rush he sent through her chest. Ancestors, she missed his gentle touches. He was the only one in the palace that should touch her – physical contact with others could corrupt her readings, her leather gloves her barrier to everyone except him.

'What are you doing here?' she hissed.

‘I’m visiting my betrothed,’ he said, holding his hands out, his grin dropping to give her a wide-eyed, innocent look. ‘Is it wrong that I miss you?’

‘Miss me?’ She lifted a brow. ‘You’ve plenty of people to keep you company, Ashioto.’

‘Yes, dear Lanna, but none of them scold me the same way you do, except First Chemist Chowa, and she doesn’t have the same assets you do.’

His smile broadened again, and his gaze fixed on her neckline then dipped down. ‘Perhaps I shouldn’t have knocked.’

Lanna growled under her breath, ‘I can’t be a seer while incarcerated.’ Her implant needed exposure to people and their behaviour to function. ‘I have no data for you. You should leave.’

Ashioto gave a low, throaty chuckle. ‘I’m not going anywhere.’

A shiver of ice slipped down her spine at the determination in his tone.

He moved past her, glancing around the small room, raising a black eyebrow.

‘It is rather homely here,’ he said. ‘I might turn this into a secret retreat once we wed.’ He turned back to her. ‘A place for us – would you like that?’

No, she wouldn’t like that. Her heart thudded in her ears. What did he want?

‘Has something happened?’ she asked, the words muted.

She should at least try to be charitable towards him or he might suspect her.

He approached with a lazy saunter. Lanna took a step back, clinging at the cloth wrapped around her. Ancestors, he couldn’t see through it, could he?

‘There is something you can help me with.’ His tone dipped – throaty and honey sweet. ‘I stopped taking Chowa’s draughts a few days ago.’

Her fingers tightened on the cotton. He was no longer using the formula to make him infertile.

‘At our rather... unusual marriage negotiation, I told you I needed heirs.’

Lanna moistened her lips. Her heart pulsed in her throat, and she wrapped her arms across her breasts. ‘I-I agreed to it, but I said not until we wed.’

He came closer and his hand slipped over the curve of her hip. ‘I don’t see why we can’t make a start now.’

She twisted away, stepping back. ‘I am in seclusion. If I get pregnant now, how will that look to the Halls? They may dissolve our marriage.’

‘Don’t worry,’ he said with a laugh.

He moved closer, this time settling a hand on the small of her back. Lanna shuddered. He was so warm. Sandalwood and heat, that was Ashioto.

‘You can’t be here.’

‘I can,’ he said, the tip of his nose brushing against her chin. ‘Are you saying you’re not willing?’

‘No – it’s just—’

‘Then what? I told you before: I plan on loving you.’

Loving, as if he knew how to do that.

‘I know you’re angry at me for Mika. I swear to you she will be safe. I won’t touch her, and won’t it be nice to have someone from your old life here?’

Lanna closed her eyes and flinched from him as guilt stabbed through her; though the situation pained her, it would be good to see her friend again.

‘Don’t be angry please. Just... be with me. I acted without thinking. I’m sorry.’

She licked her lips as her breath picked up. He trailed a fingertip over her collarbone and her skin tingled. Lanna gritted her teeth, holding herself back.

‘I thought I needed something to push you into marriage. Forgive me.’

‘I can’t,’ she whispered, chin trembling. His words hacked and chipped at her resolve.

‘What will it take? Is my vow not enough?’ His lips grazed her jaw and a jolt of heat speared through her belly. Her breath caught. She made to pull away, but his hand on her back prevented her.

‘Don’t go.’ His mouth edged up to her earlobe, hovering just over the jewelled ear cuff – puffing hot against the metal.

‘Lanna, tell me what you want. What will make you trust me?’

His potent offer hung in the air between them. This was not like the marriage negotiations: he wanted to know how to buy her affection. The cotton against her chest felt too rough. His hands glided over her shoulders, and blood throbbed under her skin.

‘I want my family to be safe.’ The words left her in a small moan as his fingers drew up her neck and pulled the ear cuff away.

‘They are well.’

‘No, you’re going to—’

He nibbled her ear. Her breath hitched and her hands pressed to his chest. She should push him away, but most of her wanted to pull him closer.

‘I can send them aid.’

Her breath caught. He would do that? It was treasury policy to neglect villages too small to save. She could be of use, save her loved ones hardship. She just had to give him what he wanted in return.

Her voice quivered. ‘You promised me after marriage.’

‘You can still decide.’ His lips curled into a carnal smile. ‘Now, and your village gets aid, or we can wait and so will they.’ His tone was light and dreamy, as if he didn’t speak of starvation.

‘That’s not fair.’

‘No, it isn’t.’ He pressed a lingering kiss to her cheek. ‘Again, I ask your forgiveness, but I have waited months, and there are so few opportunities for us to be alone.’ His slick tongue lapped up the throbbing pulse in her neck. ‘I can take care of everything for you, even your village. So be with me.’

Something broke. Lanna jerked her head down and her lips met his, and she slipped her arms around his neck.

‘That’s it,’ he sighed, pulling his mouth from hers. ‘Relax.’

Her eyes fluttered closed, and she did not flinch as he tugged the cloth away from her body. It slid down her legs and crumpled at her feet in a heap. She quivered, but not from the cold – her skin burnt as his fingers trailed across the top of her breasts.

‘I’m going to make you feel so good.’

He kissed up her neck, cupping her face and drawing her lips towards him once again. Her legs trembled and pushed together as his mouth nipped and sucked at her throat, then down over her collarbone.

He tugged at his clothing as if he couldn’t rid himself of it fast enough, silks slipping over lithe, toned muscle and sliding beneath flawless skin. He gave a low throaty chuckle, his fingers digging into her hips and pulling her tight against him.

‘You’ve only ever been with the farmer’s boy,’ he said as his tongue ran over the swell of her chest. ‘I’m going to take my time. By morning, you will have forgotten all about him.’

Lanna opened her mouth to protest but found she couldn’t speak when Ashioto’s mouth met her sensitive nubs and sucked.

Fire raced across her mind and obliterated everything. Her back arched, a long, low moan rumbling through her.

His teeth tweaked, and his tongue twirled over the delicate flesh. He left moist trails in his wake that slid against his bare chest as he pulled her to him.

A heat she had never felt before spread from her stomach to her toes. Her fingers wove into his hair, teasing, tugging – pulling it over his shoulder, winding it around her hands.

‘Gently,’ he whispered as if she was a skittish kelen. ‘I’m pleasing you, not fighting you.’ With a smirk and a flash of desire in his dark eyes, he turned his head to kiss at her taut knuckles until her hand released to slide down his corded arm.

‘This is supposed to be fun.’

Her face burnt. After only a few hasty couplings, she had little idea of what to do beyond the mechanical act.

He gave a light chuckle as his hands moved downward to glide over her rear. ‘I didn’t think you’d be this adorably naïve.’

‘Don’t – don’t tease me,’ she whimpered.

‘I’m not.’ His tone deepened, becoming husky. ‘I have a surprise for you.’

With aching slowness, his lips travelled down her stomach, and he folded himself onto his knees, looking up at her through his long dark eyelashes.

‘I have so much to show you,’ he said in a voice breathy with excitement. ‘Trust me.’ He flicked his hair away from his face, and his hungry gaze fixed on the hairless space between her legs.

He opened his mouth and gave a languid lick.

The world fell away, and there was nothing but his tongue. She abandoned herself to the wild burn, and her hands dropped to his head, running through his satin hair as he coaxed her to the edge. She bent a leg to hook it over his shoulder, hips angled to offer everything, then Lanna moaned his name and surrendered herself to all he wanted to teach her that night.

Chapter Three

When she woke, darkness greeted her. Lanna lay naked and twisted up in her fine cotton blankets. Sweat pooled in the hollow of her back. She raised her head, blinking. Where was he?

They had eventually made it to the bed, at least. With deft fingers and wicked kisses, he'd pleased her only to leave her hanging, moving away from where she wanted him to tease her neck, breasts, stomach; until she begged him to give her what she needed.

And he did.

She swallowed, throat raw from screaming, but there was a lightness in her chest that made her smile. Judging by the weary ache in her legs and her heavy eyelids, she would soon slip back into oblivion.

Thank the ancestors Lucas remained asleep.

'Rest,' came soft words from the gloom.

Ashioto's form bent over the small desk in the corner, a single light burning near his bent elbow. Brush in hand, the bristles flew over slats of bamboo.

'What are you doing?'

The lamp flickered, sending shadows to flutter over the taut muscles in his chest and arms. His hair hung over his shoulders, so long that the ends brushed over his tapered hips.

'What you need me to.' He glanced over at her, his cheek twitching as he gave her a lazy smile, cheekbones highlighted with the captivating glint in his eyes. Ancestors, he was beautiful.

'I must be gone by morning. I don't want a scandal.'

She snorted at him, blinking. 'It's not my fault you couldn't wait.'

‘No, but it is your fault you’re so tempting,’ he said, dipping his brush back into the ink. ‘I missed you.’

The sentiment wormed its way into her heart and settled there, fluttering, warm. Why was he so nice to her? Did he treat all of his women like this? At least now she could make sense of Itzander’s obsession with him.

With a groan, he stood, wiping his fingers across his hip, staining his perfect skin with black streaks.

‘Tomorrow, have one of your slaves send this scroll to the agricultural department.’

He padded over the carpet towards her. She could not help but admire him as the faint light slipped over his stomach and down his legs.

He gave an easy laugh and tapped his nose with his index finger. ‘I know I’m wonderful, but please, you’ve had enough of me. No more for you, greedy.’

She let out a small whine of protest when his hands clamped over her waist and shoulder and rolled her sideways. Her part of the bed was cold, but it soon warmed up when he climbed in beside her and snuggled into her chest, twisting his legs around hers to leave not a fraction of space between them.

‘Sleep,’ he said, nuzzling his face into her neck – taking a deep breath as if inhaling her scent. ‘We can talk about this another day.’

She let her eyes slid closed, exhausted contentment seeping through her as she sank into the bed.

‘Lanna?’

She gave a hum of reply.

‘Are you still angry at me?’ The words came soft, near childlike.

‘No.’ The distressing thing was she meant it. All her rage and resentment towards his manipulation of her and his cruelty... he’d soothed it all away.

She had one last disturbing thought before she slept.

Lucas had been correct. In the end, she had sold herself. Ashioto just had to find the right price.