Wine, Knife, Sword

A Tale from the Eight Islands

by

Lian Hearn

I had only been married a few months when my husband was murdered. A man called Okuda Tadaie held the sword that cut him down, but the man who gave the order was Saga Hideki, the Emperor’s general, lord of the Eight Islands. It was on the second day of a hunt arranged to honour Lord Okuda, our guest from the capital.

It was the punishment I brought on our family for refusing to take Lord Saga’s selection for my bridegroom. I had already chosen our neighbour’s son, my best friend and childhood companion.

I don’t suppose there is any other bliss that can compare to lying with the one you have loved and desired for so long, to giving yourself body and soul … I had it for a brief time. Now all that was left was to pray that my husband waited for me in that other world where we would share the same lotus leaf throughout eternity.

But when I was not praying I was dreaming of revenge.

Nothing alleviated my terrible grief except my determination to hunt down Okuda and kill him, and his master, Lord Saga, too. I did not want to be a widow who submitted to her senior retainers and allowed herself to be remarried, giving up the estates of Umaoka and Kuritani. I wanted to lay claim to those estates as my own, fight Saga and punish Okuda. But everyone around me seemed disabled by grief and shock and already I sensed the feeling among my men that Saga could not be opposed. Now he had turned his attention towards us there would be no escape. His will stretched all the way from Miyako and weakened everyone it touched. My senior retainers began to talk about Otori Shigeko, the Maruyama lady, who had married Saga himself in order to avoid further warfare. I knew it was their opinion that my sister and I should follow her example and submit.

I wished Lady Shigeko would take advantage of the intimacy of the marriage bed and stab her husband in the throat.

A month after the murders I rose at dawn and went to the forest behind the shrine on the hill. My monthly bleeding had been late and I had been nursing a fierce hope that I had conceived a child the last time my husband and I had lain together. But in the night I had felt the familiar dull pain and by the time I reached the forest the blood was flowing. Even my phantom child had been taken away from me. I gazed out to where the Kuritani Islands rose from a mist covered sea. I thought I had passed through the worst of the river of grief but there are always more depths waiting for you. There was no one to hear me, no maids, no men, no little sister to shield from my despair. I fell to my knees, clutching my aching belly, screaming and sobbing like a mad woman. My pain penetrated the earth itself, waking all that was dead, all that was lost.

When the flow of my tears finally lessened I sat up and wiped them from my face. I could feel the sticky blood between my legs and when I moved I saw drops on the pine needles. Blood and tears had mingled. At that moment I wanted to end my life.

The only thing that prevented me was my sister. She was five years younger than me, twelve years to my seventeen, and I had always been like a mother to her. I could not leave her alone. Other people did not understand her. They were frightened of her sudden trances and her strange abrupt way of speaking.

The sacred horses whinnied to me. The shrine was dedicated to the fire god and the two horses had been chosen for their bright red colour and their black hooves and legs which made them look as if they had walked through embers and ash. The shrine was so small it was only used twice a year, in spring and autumn, so rather than let the horses stand around being bored people borrowed them for various purposes, and fed them in return. They were used to humans.

On the first day of the hunt these horses had carried home the carcasses of the deer and boar. That evening my husband had said to me, ‘Imagine, Lord Okuda expressed a wish to take our red horses back to Miyako .What should I have done? Should I have offered them to him?’

‘Certainly not!’ I replied. ‘They belong to the shrine, to the red fire god.’

‘That’s what I told him!’

And we laughed together at the man’s arrogance. The next day it was my husband’s body that the red horses carried home.

*A hunting accident,* I was told. His horse fell and threw him. But I saw the body and the wounds on it.

I went and petted the horses, my husband’s words echoing in my ears. ‘What should I do?’ I said aloud. ‘Accept the marriage Lord Saga demands, persuade the men to rise up and fight back, or take my own life and my sister’s?’

I imagined myself cutting Rei’s throat and then my own. I did not think I would be able to do that. Then I thought we might hold hands and jump off the cliff together, but Rei was not capable of taking that decision, so how could I make it for her? The horses blew through their nostrils at me and made no other reply.

Our coast is always windy. The pine trees rustle and sough, spray flies high from the waves below, buildings creak and sigh, but sometimes, around dawn, the wind drops and the world suddenly becomes hushed. I realised the sacred trees looming over my head were completely still and I could not hear the sea. The silence made me uneasy. I felt as if someone was watching me.

‘Help me,’ I whispered, maybe to the horses, maybe to whoever it was out there listening. ‘I will give you anything, I promise, if only you will help me. I swear it by my blood and tears.’

The pine needles shifted very slightly as if under a footfall and I felt a sudden shiver in the air, though there was still no wind. The straggling bushes beneath the trees moved as if someone passed between them.

‘Come back!’ I called. ‘Come back!’ I thought it might be my husband’s spirit. I ran to the bushes only to be brought up by an impenetrable tangle of kudzu vine.

There was a faint smell of smoke and then the wind sprang up again and blew it away.

When I went home my sister was awake. As soon as she saw me she said, ‘I’m not marrying anyone. You know I can’t.’

I knew she had been worrying about the matter most of the night. She was pale and trembling.

‘You won’t have to get married,’ I said. ‘And I will never marry again.’

‘Let’s be nuns or shrine maidens,’ Rei suggested. ‘We will live at the shrine with the horses.’

I thought, we might become nuns like Lady Tora in the tale of the Soga brothers. But I did not really wish to be like the women in the story. I would be like the brothers themselves, like Juro and Goro, and I would take revenge.

I looked at Rei. Her hair was matted, her face and feet dirty. I must have looked the same.

‘Come,’ I said. ‘Let’s go and bathe.’

A little way from our house there was a small hot spring that was only used by women. There were many springs in our domain and on the islands, steamy and sulphurous, some scalding, in which famous warriors of the past were said to have been healed of their wounds, and some like this one more temperate. Boiling or cool, it would not heal my wounds. As I followed Rei into the water I thought about the battle that is a woman’s life: the monthly skirmish with pain and blood, the invasion and occupation of the body in marriage, the life-threatening single combat of childbirth.

I had washed Rei’s hair and then my own. I hoped the day would warm so we would dry quickly. When we returned to the house one of our maids, Nami, brought clean robes. After we were dressed she helped me comb out my hair while I combed Rei’s. We sat in the sun, our hair spread over our shoulders and down our backs. Nami fetched tea.

‘It’s no more than twigs,’ she said. ‘We have run out of leaves.’

Someone called from the garden. ‘Submit to Lord Saga, accept his offers and you’ll drink the finest tea every day for the rest of your lives.’

I could not see his face against the light but I knew his voice. His name was Kitabatake and he was one of my father’s senior retainers. His grandfather had submitted to our family, the Umaoka, after generations of rivalry, and the grandson seemed to retain some lingering resentment. My father had treated him with respect and wariness. I had always mistrusted him. Rei was nervous in his presence and I could feel her growing tense now.

‘It would be for the best,’ the man said as he approached the verandah. He did not bow but let his gaze linger on me, as if I was still the child he had watched grow up and not an adult woman, the lady of Umaoka and the Kuritani islands. It felt quite shameful that he should see us with our hair not yet dry but I did not know how to reprimand him.

‘Messages came yesterday from Lord Saga,’ Kitabatake said. ‘He sent some very generous gifts too. Two of his sons are on their way by ship to Minatogura. They are to marry you two sisters and take over your father’s estates as well as the islands that were your husband’s.’

Rei’s face had turned greenish-white and she was trembling. I was regretting washing her hair, and afraid she would catch cold.

‘I have no desire to marry again,’ I said. ‘’As for Rei – she is too young and…well, she is not able to marry.’ It pained me to speak like this in front of her. She heard and understood everything though she often appeared not to.

Kitabatake studied her. He saw a girl on the threshhold of womanhood. ‘She looks old enough to me,’ he said. ‘And what is the alternative? If we refuse and prepare to fight we won’t hold out for long. We would be outnumbered. Umaoka is hardly even fortified; we don’t have the men to defend it. And frankly none of our neighbours is going to risk offending Saga by coming to your aid.’

I could think of nothing to say.

‘Make up your mind quickly, Lady Ren,’ he said as he walked away.

His words left me feeling powerless and humiliated. My sister would not eat and midday. She was still pale and trembling and would not utter a word. I might have wished with all my heart that she was like other girls, that I could discuss the situation with her, hear her opinion, even receive advice from her, but there was no point in such wishing. She was as she was and I had to look after her.

I made a list in my head. One: accept Lord Saga’s command. Two: kill ourselves that night. Three: go to Miyako and kill Saga.

‘Wine, knife or sword?’ I said to Rei. She looked at me, puzzled.

‘Choose one. Wine, knife, sword.’ Wine for the marriage ceremony, knife to cut our throats, sword for revenge.

She turned her head away from me as if she had heard something behind her. She listened for a moment and then whispered, ‘Sword’.

I draw her close to me and ran my hands through her silky hair. I tied it back with a red cord and whispered in her ear.

‘That means we run away tonight.’

Then I tied back my own hair in preparation.

I had never been to Minatogura, the great port of the eastern coast, let alone to Miyako, the capital of the Eight Islands. Apart from a little history and a few legends I knew nothing about the country I was planning to cross. My husband had told me that the high roads to the west were protected by guard posts and barriers, but I still thought it might be easier to make our way by land rather than by sea. And we would go on foot; looking after horses on the way would be too hard.

I did not tell any one of our plans, not even Nami. And because she hovered over us all the time I did not make elaborate preparations. I put a spare pair of sandals for each of us in a carrying cloth, along with a string of copper coins. My father had shown me their hiding place beneath a floor board.

For the last week the weather had been fine and mild with the clear days and misty mornings of autumn. The moon was halfway towards full. The Full Moon of the Ninth month was when we celebrated with the largest festival of the year. I wondered where Rei and I would be then.

I’d told Rei to stay awake which was no hardship for her. I’d hoped to creep out of the house when everyone else was asleep. But Nami, who slept in the same room, stirred as we went past her.

‘What’s wrong?’ she said in a low voice. ‘Can’t you sleep? I will sit with Lady Rei if you like.’

At that moment the last thing I wanted was her kindness. I spoke in a cold voice. ‘Rei feels a trance coming on. It’s better if you don’t interfere.

As I said, the trances frightened people. They sensed her closeness to *that other world,* the world of spirits.

‘I’m taking her outside for a while,’ I said.

‘Do you need any help?’ Nami began to get up. ‘I’ll come with you.’

‘No!’ I hissed. ‘It will be shorter if we are alone. Go back to sleep.’

I took the bundle from where I’d hidden it under the verandah and Rei and I quickly slipped into our sandals. As we left the garden by the west gate she grabbed my handand said, ‘I love you, Ren.’

No one else ever talked like that. Even my husband had never said those words to me.

‘Do you want to know why?’ Rei said in such a clear voice I was sure the whole household would hear her.

‘We mustn’t talk now,’ I whispered. ‘Let’s be as quiet as we can, like little mice. Tell me later.’

I could see the stars and the hazy moon but the mist was forming and by the time we started to climb the track to the pass it was already thick enough to hide all but a few paces ahead. I did not like walking blind over the mountain, although I knew the path well, but I wasn’t going to stop or turn back.

Rei said quietly at my side, ‘I love you because you always know when *it’s* going to happen.

‘It’s not going to happen. I just said that to keep Nami quiet.’

‘But it is. It’s starting now.’

We were walking close, arm in arm, and I felt her body go rigid. That was how it began. Every muscle locked so you would have thought it impossible for her to move. And yet she moved, spun by what looked like some external force. And she spoke, words pouring out of her in a language no one understood or had ever heard before. There was no point trying to question her and I could not keep her on the path. Nor could I let go. Her hand was locked in mine, her grip inescapable. She spun and I followed, blind in the mist, grazing my legs against outcrops of rocks, stumbling as my sandals were wrenched from my feet. Sharp stones cut my soles. We were close to the edge of the cliff. Any moment we would fall spinning off the mountain.

I called her name, my voice a shriek in the dark. ‘Rei! Rei!’ but she was beyond hearing.

A fatalism settled over me. It was all decided for me now. I would never get to kill Lord Saga but my sister and I would die together. I whispered to my husband, ‘I will be with you soon. Are you waiting for me?’

I did not think I had spoken loudly enough for anyone to hear but a reply came out of the darkness.

‘It is not yet time.’ It was my husband’s voice, deepened by sorrow.It made my breath catch so I could hardly breathe and tears burst from my eyes. Then the voice spoke again, and the timbre was like my long dead father’s but I could not make out the words. It was some language that came from beyond the grave.

It seemed to calm Rei. Abruptly the spinning came to a halt. Her grip on my hand slackened. I could hear her breath coming in deep sobs, and behind it the roar of the waves at the foot of the cliff. Her hand slipped from my grasp. I could not see her or feel her. I tried to speak calmly. ‘Rei, walk away from the cliff, walk away from the waves.’

Whoever it was hidden in the mist repeated my words in the tone of my mother.

‘Rei, walk away from the cliff.’

Seven years had passed since my mother died. I was ten, Rei five. Your mother’s voice is the first you recognise and the last you forget. Now I was sure we were already dead and in *that other world*. I felt no fear, for if these were were ghosts they were all dear and familiar to me.

Rei walked into me and I seized her, holding her close. Her head found my breast and she leaned into me. The ground was firm beneath my feet. An owl hooted from the forest. The cuts on my legs and feet were smarting. I was alive.

Rei would be bewildered and docile for a while and then she would sleep for a long time, but we could not wait while she slept.

‘Rei, we must keep moving. Can you walk?’

‘I’m tired,’ she murmured.

She felt so frail in my arms. I could easily carry her.

The voice spoke again, a mixture of male and female, all those I had loved and lost.

‘I will carry her.’

‘Who are you?’ I said. ‘Come closer so I can see you.’ Though I don’t know what I hoped to see in the darkness and the mist.

Yet there was a glow as it approached me. By its light I saw a figure dressed in men’s clothes, a sword at his waist and a flute in his sash. He was tall, yet slight with delicate features more like a woman’s, and radiant eyes which lit up his face and gave it a reddish tinge. *It is a mountain man,* I thought. People said they stole young women to be their wives and then devoured any children that were born. Yet I was not afraid – I could not be afraid of anyone speaking in that voice.

It was the way spirits entrapped humans but I did not think of it at that time.

Nor did Rei. ‘All right,’ she said gratefully, turning to him and sinking into his arms. He caught her and lifted her easily holding her against his shoulder like a child.

‘Rei!’ he said in delight. ‘Rei and Ren!’

‘Who are you?’ I said again.

‘You don’t need to know my name. You did not know it when you called me before. Don’t you remember? You asked for my help at the shrine and I have come. I had to.’

He paused for a moment and when I said nothing went on. ‘Let’s go.’

‘Where to?’ I began thinking of dark caves or sorcerer’s huts thatched with bones.

‘To Miyako, of course, to the great capital. Isn’t that where you wanted to go?’

He began walking without any more discussion and I followed him. The light that fell from his eyes showed me the path. I had summoned a being that was not human and I had no doubt he would give me the help I needed but I had promised to give him whatever he wanted in return.

We had walked uphill for a little way when the mist began to clear. We stepped out into moonlight. We had come to the top of the pass. Below lay a sea of clouds, out of which emerged mountain peaks, some pine covered, some bare black rocks, the furthest ones snowcapped.

‘You can sit and rest but not for long,’ said the being.

I sank down on the pine needle covered ground. The needles were soaked with dew but their resiny smell was comforting. I was aching all over. He let Rei slide down until she lay with her head in my lap. She murmured something but did not wake.

The being sat down cross legged next to us, took the flute from his sash and set it to his lips. In the stream of music I recognised some of the tunes from our festivals but his playing was far more skilful and complex. It touched something deep inside me and I wanted it never to end.

I closed my eyes and dream images began to show themselves to me. Then I heard clearly the sound of horses.

‘They are following us!’ My eyes snapped open.

‘Don’t worry, don’t be afraid.’ His eyes shone like embers.

The red horses from the shrine came up out of the mist, first their maned heads and necks, then their backs and tails, finally their black legs, almost invisible against the basalt rocks around us.

They wore the old fashioned harness, fringed with red silk thread interwoven with gold, in which they were dressed for the festivals. The being greeted them and thanked them for coming. They lowered their heads and breathed out plumes of mist at him.

‘This is Ka and this is Hai,’ he said. He told them our names and asked them to treat us with kindness. I felt I should apologise for all the times they had been made to work in the village. Or thank them for bringing my husband home to me.

He helped me mount the one called Ka and then he lifted my still sleeping sister and leaped onto Hai’s back. The horses began the descent as the moon set and the sky slowly became fringed with the red light of dawn.

So they were magical horses all along, I thought, and half expected them to canter lightly over the sea of clouds but they followed the track down into the mist until we were all swallowed up by it. The air became dank and chill. Rei slept on. At first the being led the way but when the track widened we rode side by side. I was able to see him more clearly now. Like the horses’ harness his clothes had an old fashioned air, and the faded fabric had once been rich, silk from Shin by the look of it, threaded with gold.

He looked like a human but he was not, yet I was too shy to ask him directly what he was. I began to feel very anxious, partly because of his strangeness but also because I was further from home than I had ever been. I was worried about guards and the barriers ahead, worried about being pursued, and all the time I felt the bonds of home tugging on me, telling me not to leave. I had thought I was a brave person but my courage was deserting me.

‘Don’t be afraid,’ the being said again. ‘I am here to protect and serve you.’

Now I dared look him straight in the face and meet his radiant gaze. ‘But I don’t know who you are!’

‘You will find out,’ he said, half mocking, half serious.

We rode most of that morning without seeing anyone. The trees and flowers were all familiar to me and the birds sang songs I knew, yet the absence of people made me feel as if we were in another world. Rei awoke around midday, pale and confused as she always was, all the more so for finding herself on the back of a red shrine horse, held by a stranger.

We stopped then and the being helped her down. He had been courteous enough to me but he treated her with a particular solicitude. He made her sit in the shade, spreading out a cloth, again faded but once luxurious, that he took from his pack. He also produced a small iron kettle and two ceramic cups.

‘Please gather some wood and build a fire,’ he said to me, as he set the cups on the ground. ‘Rei and I will have to share,’ he added, smiling to himself. ‘I will go and get water.’

Rei gazed after him. ‘He’s someone we know, isn’t he? Some relative I met a long time ago? I’ve forgotten his name.’

‘You’ve never met him.’ My voice sounded cross to my own ears but Rei did not seem to notice.

‘He’s nice,’ she said, wistful as she often was after a trance.

I began to scour the small grove for dead sticks, pine cones and dried grass for tinder. I cleared a circle in the earth and set up the makings of the fire. The being came back from the spring, clicked his tongue in disapproval and rearranged my efforts. I did not see how he did it but one moment the pile was dead, the next it had burst into flames. He balanced the kettle between two flat stones and when the water began to bubble he threw in some aromatic leaves. After a few moments he lifted the kettle by its handle.

‘Be careful!’ I said, ‘You will burn yourself.’

He smiled as if I had said something funny and poured the tea into two cups. He gave one to me and took a few sips from the other before passing it to Rei.

‘Don’t drink it,’ I began to say, but it was too late. Rei had already placed her lips where his had been. I turned my cup in my hands, wondering if I should not pour it out, but the fragrance from the tea was so beguiling and I was so thirsty that I could not prevent myself from drinking too.

We rested under the tree while the being saw to the horses. He removed their harness and let them roll on the ground, then led them off to the spring to drink. I fell asleep and when I woke it was late in the afternoon.

The fire still burned, its flames almost invisible in the sunlight. Rei had been picking flowers and had made a garland. She looked like a spirit of the forest. I was afraid she had been enchanted and was going to slip away from me. I knew we needed to to be among ordinary people again.

‘We must find lodging,’ I said. ‘I don’t want to spend another night outside.’

He nodded as if humoring a child. ‘Then let us ride on.’

He prepared the horses and when Rei and I were mounted he waved his hand towards the fire and spoke a word I did not know. The flames leaped up as though in yearning and then subsided and were extinguished.

The moon had risen, white in the afternoon sky. By the time it turned silver we were approaching a small town. I did not know which clan it belonged to, perhaps the Yamada, one of the neighbours who would not come to our help. It consisted of several dwellings and shops on either side of the road and one large inn. Torches burned at its entrance filling the air with smoke. Behind the inn horses were tied on lines and they stamped and neighed as our two red horses approached. Grooms turned their heads towards us. They wore crests on their jackets, some the single peak of the Yamada and at least two the jagged mountain range of Lord Saga.

My heart stopped, plunged and then started up again so fast I thought I would faint.

‘Saga’s men are here already,’ I said, trying to lower my voice so I would not be heard and keeping my head down so no one saw my face.

The being stared openly at the grooms, and they stared back, seeming to be more interested in the horses than the riders. One said something to the other but I could not hear the words.

I remembered Okuda had coveted the red horses and I feared these were his men who had been sent to retrieve them. Surely they would deduce who we were and take us into their possession too.

The being dismounted and lifted Rei down. He went into the inn and came back to say he had procured space for us in a room reserved for women travcllers.

‘I will stay outside with the horses,’ he said to me as he took Ka’s reins. ‘No one will take them and no one will take Rei or you.’

I looked into his radiant eyes and could only trust him. As he walked away the flames from the torches bent towards him and seemed to hiss and sigh.

Rei ate a little at the evening meal.There were many things I wanted to ask her – did she understand the being’s archaic words, was it the same language she used, did he always speak truth – but her face was soft and dreamy and after the meal she fell asleep quickly. I stayed awake all night listening for the sound of horses’ hooves. I longed for daylight and dreaded it.

Before it was light I woke Rei and led her outside. It was another misty morning, the tang of winter chilling my face. No one else was up but the being had the horses ready. Their red coats glowed in the grey landscape as if they sucked colour from everything around them. As we rode away I looked back but no one was following us. But I remained tense all morning, making Ka nervous and skittish.

Rei was the opposite, more relaxed than I had ever seen her, in the circle of the being’s arms. She had never been considered beautiful, but now I could see she was. She did not speak, but every now and then the being pointed something out to her, kites swooping over a river, a cloud shaped like a mushroom, red splashes of leaves on a high mountain, clusters of autumn lilies, a distant silver thread that was a waterfall, and she laughed in delight.

I had never heard such laughter from her before.

The road followed the valleys between the hills, crossing shallow rivers, skirting deep bays and estuaries. Mostly it was well maintained but in places it had been washed away by rain or damaged by earth tremors. The horses snorted as they picked their way through ruts and around boulders but they were surefooted and did not stumble.

We had been riding all day when the land seemed to flatten, the valleys became wider. Dykes and empty stubbled rice fields stretched away on either side of the road, the rice stalks drying on long poles.

I smelt smoke and ahead saw the low roofs of a small town. Just before them stood the wooden guard posts of the barrier that signalled the boundary of a domain. I glanced at the being. Were we going to ride through or attempt to go around somehow. And what story would he have ready to tell the guards?

His demeanour had altered in some way. It was not that he was tense as I was, but he was more alert than he had been all day. The horses put their ears back, twitching them as if they could hear something. I was sure the being’s rather long ears were twitching too. Then I heard it, a dull pounding on the road behind us – a horse galloping, maybe two. Ka was trembling beneath me. I drew the reins tighter, preparing to ride on fast, all the while looking at the being for some clue as to what we would do next.

The two riders came up beind us, separated and swept past us, making Ka buck a little. I brought him back under control with a momentary flash of relief as I thought they were going on and had no interest in us, but they came to an abrupt halt a little way ahead and wheeled around to face us and block our way.

We were only a short distance from the barrier and I could see armed men rushing out of the guardhouse.

I expected the horsemen to draw their swords but instead one of them spoke quite politely to the being.

‘We did not mean to alarm you. We saw the horses at the inn and realised they must be the ones our lord desired to acquire a few weeks ago. We would like to buy them from you to present them to him.’

The being frowned as though he did not understand the words. Finally he said, ‘They are not for sale.’

The other man snorted incredulously while the first said, less courteously, ‘You don’t understand. When Lord Okuda desires something, he gets it. I’ve offered you money and I advise you to accept.’

‘If you don’t we will just take them,’ said the second man.

‘It is you who understands nothing,’ Rei said boldly. ‘They are shrine horses, not to be bought or sold. They belong to the Fire God.’

The men looked astonished to be addressed in such a way and the first one looked more closely at Rei and then at me. Some realisation came into his eyes and he said, ‘Lady Umaoka? And this must be your sister. Why are you here? Did you ride to meet us? We were sent to make preparations for the arrival of Lord Saga’s sons. You must have received my message?’

‘Was there some misunderstanding?’ The other man’s voice was bland on the surface and threatening beneath. ‘Or are the Umaoka still in rebellion against the will of Lord Saga? Let’s take the horses now.

He rode forward to seize Ka’s reins. Ka reared and struck out with his front feet. The other horse laid back it ears and tried to bite.

‘Ren,’ the being said in a voice as clear as a flame. ‘Ride on.’

I was struggling to bring Ka under control.

‘Dismount before you get hurt!’ The man’s tone was rude, his language too familiar as if I were a servant or a child. It enraged me. I would rather die than obey him. Ka reared again.

The being spoke in that unknown language and Rei echoed him in a perfect imitation. He let his gaze, his eyes glowing more brightly than ever, sweep over the men in front of us and then beyond them. Smoke began to rise from the wooden structures of the guardhouses and the barrier, at first a few wisps, blue in the autumn air, then flames, as bright as the setting sun.

Men began to shout in alarm, dropping their weapons as they ran to get buckets of water. The bridles and reins of the horses in our path smoked and glowed. The horses squealed and bucked in fear as their riders struggled to tear the burning harness from them. The men’s own clothes began to smoulder. The grass at the side of the road burst into flames.

Ka gave a huge leap, almost unseating me. I clung to his mane as he raced forward and jumped over the burning barrier. I could see nothing, blinded by smoke, my eyes pouring tears. Then we were on the other side, galloping down the street as people came running out of their houses preparing to try and save the town. Ka was completely out of my control. I could do nothing but hang on.

Eventually on the further edge of town he slowed to a canter and responded again to my touch on the reins. Hai came alonside and the two horses whinnied to each other as they cantered, their paces in perfect harmony.

The being held Rei with one arm. She was laughing frenetically. ‘Take the horses!’ she cried. ‘What a foolish idea.’ In the light of the setting sun her eyes glowed as brightly and fiercely as his, as the Fire God’s.

The Fire God, protector and destroyer, loyal and fickle, companion and betrayer, had answered my call for help, and now I knew I would succeed. I would get the revenge I craved. But in return I had given him my sister.