

THE
TIGER
AT
MIDNIGHT

SWATI TEERDHALA

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An imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

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Chapter 1

Kunal's eyes, sharp as an eagle's, were used to studying an enemy's armor for chinks or a battle plan for flaws. But tonight they rested on the sea.

Across the water, the outline of the coast of Dharka looked as if it was etched into the night—a shadow of reality compared to the starkness of the rocky Jansan cliffs below. Kunal longed to sketch it, capture the shades of moonlight.

Chilly air tickled the stubble on his jaw as he sat, perched on the highest wall of the Red Fortress, with his curved longbow at his side. It had been many moons since he'd had a moment to close his eyes and feel the wind on his skin with such abandon. Terms for the cease-fire with the Dharkans had been drawn up that morning, so watch duty was a formality today, but not one he was about to shirk.

Kunal stared out into the sooty darkness, his eyes unfocused. No one would be out there on the abandoned battle lines either, the soldiers too busy celebrating the momentary peace with rice wine and games of dice.

Except—there was movement.

He was up in a flash, peering out over the curved bell of the rampart's window. A small figure weaved her way through the encampment on the western side of the Fort with delicate steps.

Moonlight highlighted her careful movements, the red sandstone of the Fort creating an eerie glow around her. Her ivory-colored *uttariya* covered her head and shoulders, but Kunal caught

a glimpse of her face under the shifting streams of light.

He abandoned his warm corner of the wall.

Kunal would have left the girl to find her way back to the harbor down below the cliff, but she was going the wrong way. In a quarter of an hour the conch would be blown, and soldiers would stream out of the west entrance for midnight exercises—drunk and in fighting moods. Though the war elephants wouldn't be out this late at night, it would still be chaos after tonight's celebrations. A lost girl could easily get underfoot as they practiced their chariot formations.

He'd risk a whipping for abandoning his post, but Kunal's stomach turned at the thought of anything happening to a civilian during his watch.

The girl disappeared under the towering shadow of the Fort, and Kunal raced from his perch to catch up. He ran down the tower stairs, nearly overturning a camphor lamp hanging from the ceiling as he shot through the narrow corridors. He reached the tall, stone arches at the bottom of the Fort and turned the corner at the side entrance, steadying his hands before he opened the door.

The foaming waves of the ocean crested and broke against the red cliffs that held up the south side of the Fort. To his left, the lights of the traders' ships glimmered up the beach, near the port. The girl stood farther down the path to his right, close to the edge of the cliff.

She looked up at the sky, moonlight cascading over her profile as she smiled.

Her smile.

It dragged an unwilling memory from the echoes of his mind. Of a childhood friend with dancing eyes and a challenging smile that had often led him into trouble. A friend long dead.

The memory ached in his chest, a remnant from an earlier life. A life where he didn't know four ways to kill a man quickly.

He watched her from the shadows of the door. The ocean breeze held a chill, and the girl wrapped her light brown arms under the end of her *uttariya*, shivering. She was clad in a simple crimson sari with a thin gold border, the bolt of stiff silk thrown over one shoulder and held up with a gold waist sash. He glanced at her feet. No toe rings, which meant she was unmarried. No anklets or earrings or ornate gold jewelry at all to denote her status. She must be one of the newly arrived traders, as they always dressed simply to show no affiliation.

Kunal felt himself relax at the realization, though he wondered why she was here—most traders should be off to the harbor by this time in the evening. Was she lost?

He revealed himself from the shadows, walking toward her.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” he said, stopping a pace away from her.

He saw her tense, clutching her *uttariya* tighter to her chest. Her eyes darted to his bronze armor, to the gold cuffs he wore at his wrists, indicating he was a soldier.

Kunal noticed the look and pulled back, swallowing his sharp tone. Of course she’d be frightened after he had said it like that. Only a few days ago, the commander of the cavalry had thrown a trader in irons for arguing with a Fort captain.

They stood there for the briefest of moments, staring at one another, neither moving as the wind crashed into them.

The girl was even more striking up close. Her chestnut eyes were huge, framed by thick, arched eyebrows. Her face shone with fear but her chin jutted out, defiant.

Kunal coughed and ventured a tentative smile. He tried to angle himself in the straining moonlight so that she would see he was unarmed and meant no harm, raising both hands for good measure. The tension in her shoulders eased and he tapped the four fingers of his right hand against his chest in greeting, the symbol of welcome and warmth in Jansa.

“I was up there and saw you going down the wrong path,” he said. Kunal cleared his throat and pointed to the embrasure that jutted out. “You’re not allowed—it isn’t safe to be on the western side of the Fort tonight.” His words came out fast, laced with a nervous energy. “Are you lost? It can be hard to navigate the trading footpaths at night. This one leads away from the harbor.”

He couldn’t remember the last time he had spoken to a girl at length; women had been removed from the Jansan army after the queendom had been dismantled, and the Fort was inhabited only by soldiers and the passing traders that helped it thrive. The other soldiers made trips into town on campaigns, but Kunal never partook in those celebrations.

He was used to seeing traders from all over the Southern Lands and Far Isles at the Fort and knew most of them by name, but he didn’t recognize her. His eyes darted to the small pin that held together her sari pleats, shaped like a jasmine flower, which he could tell was Dharkan-made. But she had no valaya, the metal bracelet Dharkans wore from birth. No Dharkan would set foot here, near the Fort, anyway—she must be Jansan.

It was uncommon to see a Jansan wear such a pin nowadays but not impossible. Before the War of the Brothers, Jansans and Dharkans had mingled: they had loved and lived together as denizens of the Southern Lands. It was only after Jansa’s queen and royal family had been murdered, ten years ago, that the war had started and the bond between their countries had fractured.

It was only after that bloody coup that Kunal’s entire life had changed.

“I’ve seen many traders deliver their goods and then get lost while staring at the Fortress’s height or numerous parapets. It’s really not that special. But I suppose I think that because I live there . . .” His words trailed off as he bit his tongue, bewildered at why his mouth had decided to come to life on its own.

She looked at him for a long beat, studying his face, and Kunal

had to resist the urge to say something to fill the silence. Finally, she lowered her head, demure.

“I believe I am lost.” Her voice was musical, measured, and a note of uncertainty crept into it. “Would you be so kind as to tell me how to get back to the harbor? I was late in dropping off my shipment of poppy seeds; I hope you will forgive me.” She bent her head, eyes lowering. “But if I don’t get back to my quarter on the ship, I’ll be left behind. The captain doesn’t look kindly on tardiness.”

He nodded briskly. Uncle Setu—known to the rest of Jansa as the revered, and feared, General Hotha—wasn’t one for lateness either.

“Of course. I’ll show you to the footpath that leads down to the harbor. I can take you there right now.”

Something akin to relief passed over the girl’s face. This captain must really have a lot in common with the general if she was that worried.

Kunal glanced up at his station at the top of the Fort. Even with the soldiers preoccupied by celebration in the courtyard inside, they would make their way outside at midnight without fail, only a quarter of an hour from now. He would have to make this quick before the western gates opened. He made a note to remind the sentries to keep a closer eye on traders from now on.

Kunal led the way to the footpath in silence, stealing glances at the girl when her gaze was dropped. The girl’s steps were jaunty for a trader, her shoulders held a bit too high. Most traders at the Fort crept about with their shoulders around their ears, in fear of invoking the general’s wrath.

But this girl. Her eyes . . . they were filled with fire and the depths of water. It bothered Kunal. Fire and water didn’t live together in harmony, yet in her eyes, it seemed perfectly natural. Something about her was so familiar, but Kunal couldn’t place it.

Perhaps she was one of the daughters of the new trade leader?

Or had just arrived on one of the trade ships from the Western Lands, across the sea?

He scuffed his toe against the stones as they crested the hill to the back entrance of the Fort where the footpath lay. One of the Fort's five sandstone pillars towered at the top of the path, the inscriptions of King Vardaan's edicts from the past decade gleaming in the light. There was a cracked white line in the stone, where a statue of the first queen of Jansa, Naria, and an eagle, the royal family's sigil, had used to stand. He still remembered the day he had asked his uncle why there was a king on Jansa's throne, instead of a queen as the gods had decreed—it had earned him his first beating.

Kunal didn't want to think about what his uncle would say if he found out he had abandoned his post, whatever the reason. An unfitting decision for a dutiful Jansan soldier, especially now with his promotion.

"Are you all right?" the girl asked. Her words were quick and unmeasured, a stark difference from her previous tone.

Kunal nodded. She arched one dark eyebrow at him. "Do soldiers normally go around frowning at imaginary people?"

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. He hadn't realized he was that easy to read. "Only every other day. You caught me on a bad one."

She chuckled, low and hearty.

Where had that come from? Kunal wasn't a flirt, wasn't even one for a bawdy song.

The girl was now glancing at him as they walked, the grimness of her earlier expression gone, something mischievous in her eye.

"Is it always this chilly on this side of the coast, or did I just come on a bad day?" she asked, referring to the peninsula that the Red Fort was situated on.

"It's been getting cooler over the past years."

She made a concerned noise. "And I haven't seen any storm

clouds. Good for our trading ships, but not so good for the land, I'm guessing."

"The land has become more arid. A quick dry spell, that's all," Kunal said, remembering what the Fort leadership had told them about the change in the land.

"I've heard tales of more than just a dry spell up north," she said, almost cautiously. When he inclined his head at her, she continued. "The price of wheat has increased this season, which I've heard is because of a lower yield due to the weather. It's even affecting the pearl market in the far east."

She was smart, that was obvious. But most of the traders who passed under the shadow of the Fort were content to know only what was going on within Jansa's borders. Kunal tried not to show his surprise at her knowledge. What made her different?

"You're right," he said. "I've heard a number of traders who were stopping by the port complain that their goods aren't selling like they used to, even in Gwali."

"Even in the capital? Must be serious," she said, chuckling. For a second she had looked as if she was going to say something else, but instead she changed the subject, asking about other news from the capital.

Kunal told her what he knew of the new cease-fire, watching her out of the corner of his eye. There was something about her, something fascinating, that compelled him to keep talking.

They arrived at the start of the graveled footpath, following the edge of the cliff the Fortress sat on down to the sandy beach below.

A tendril of black hair escaped her *uttariya* and fell across her cheek. Kunal wondered what it'd be like to brush it aside, draw that gaze to him.

He considered the impulse, but his hands remained at his sides.

Helping the girl was one thing. His uncle wouldn't excuse anything more. He shook his head as if to erase the thought. He needed to get back to his post before anyone noticed he was gone.

“Follow this path down to the harbor and you should be able to slip onto your ship before the captain notices,” Kunal said.

“You’re not going to walk me down?” she asked, angling her face up at him.

He hesitated. It was a bold question, but not without cause. He couldn’t tell if she actually wanted him to, her face unreadable.

He shook his head. “No, I have to get back to my post. But I’ll watch from up there,” Kunal said, pointing up to his perch. “If you need anything, anything at all, wave.”

Her eyes darted between him and the Fort.

“Thank you,” she said, her words carrying a strange intensity. He nodded.

“It was a pleasure to meet you.” He reached for her hand. Startled, she looked up and he held her gaze, refusing to give it up. Kunal brought her hand to his lips. “What is your name?”