THE MERCILESS ONES

GODDESSES WILL RISE.

EMPIRES WILL FALL.

AND ONE GIRL HOLDS THE POWER TO CHANGE IT ALL.

It's been six months since Deka freed the goddesses in the ancient kingdom of Otera, and discovered who she really is... But war is waging across the kingdom, and the real battle has only just begun. For there is a dark force growing in Otera – a merciless power that Deka and her army must stop.

Yet hidden secrets threaten to destroy everything Deka has known. And with her own gifts changing, Deka must discover if she holds the key to saving Otera... or if she might be its greatest threat.

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THE MERCILESS ONES

NAMINA FORNA

THE MERCILESS ONES *includes scenes of violence, including some graphic violence and sexual assault, which some readers may find distressing.*

Golma
Harukana
Sembugard
Northern Provinces
Nagrabal
Eastern Provinces
Gar Melanis
Zhang-Do
Ebungard
Irfut
Xibal
Hemaira
Gar Suma
Gar Nasim
Gar Sinkarie
Southern Provinces
Western Provinces
Gar Shekou
Hualpa
Gar Satu
N
W
E
S
N'Oyo Mountains
Gar Monyanï
Nibari Desert
Gar Fatu
Unknown Lands
OTERA

ONE

There are four of them.

Corpses. Each one female and young – around my age, if that.

They're mounted on stakes at the mouth of the jungle, the evening shadows spreading inky tendrils over their ash-coloured skin and bulging, distended stomachs. They almost look like dolls…except dolls don't have black masks hiding their faces like funeral cowls, and they certainly don't smell putrid, like animal carcasses left too long in the sun. The stench of rot wafts past, and my stomach lurches. I don't like the odour of meat even under normal circumstances, but this – the stink of those bodies displayed among the tangle of roots and ferns… Sweat turns my palms slick, and a subtle tremor begins in my muscles. I focus on the necklace hidden under my armour, my touchstone in times like this. The mothers gave it to me some months ago to replace the one I inherited from my birth mother, Umu.

When I tug on it mentally, a replying vibration travels through me – an acknowledgment from the mothers: they're

here with me. No matter how difficult things become, the goddesses are always there, silently supporting me.

"Think we should risk takin' them down, Deka?" Britta's voice sounds oddly composed as it pushes against my whirling thoughts.

Just last year, she would have been in tears. She was the typical Northern farm girl then – blonde, rosy-cheeked, and plump. Now, her muscles are as formidable as her curves, her skin is golden from the desert sun, and her heart is hardened against such sights. Her entire posture bristles with rage, but she remains quiet as she stares at the bodies.

I do the same, all the while steadfastly ignoring the strange heartbeat pounding in the underbrush just a few lengths from me. The person it belongs to has been there for some time now, but they're so loud, and are making so much clamour, it's obvious they're not one of the jatu – the former emperor's guards, and our sworn enemies – or any other threat, for that matter.

Perhaps the heartbeats are related to one of the corpses. It wouldn't be the first time I've encountered a grieving family member at a site like this. There are many such displays all across Otera now, warnings to women: step one foot out of line and this is what will happen to you. Each one is a bitter reminder that the longer we take to eliminate the priests and the jatu, the more the women of Otera suffer and the more our friends back in Hemaira—

I dismiss the thought by regarding the corpses' distended abdomens. "No," I finally reply. "They're too far gone." Usually, we take any female corpses we come across down from the

stakes, but these girls' bellies are swollen by the heat, which means they're likely to explode if we touch them.

I turn to my other companions, Belcalis, Asha, Adwapa, and Katya. They are nearly indistinguishable among the towering tree trunks because of their leathery black armour, which we all wear during raids, as do the gryphs – the winged striped desert cats they use as mounts. The sight is so familiar, I half expect Keita and the other uruni, our partners and brothers in arms, to stroll out of the jungle and join the group. They're off in Hemaira, however, aiding our siege on the capital's gates, which still haven't fallen after six months of relentless attack.

"We continue on foot," I say. "There'll be traps now."

Change, Ixa, I add mentally, speaking to my shapeshifting companion.

Deka, he agrees from underneath me, already shrinking to a smaller size. Normally, Ixa looks like a gigantic blue-scaled cat with horns jutting from its head like a crown, but for missions like these, he prefers to take the form of a small blue bird – a nightflyer.

He's already sprouting wings when I climb off him.

As he flits into the silvery branches of a broad-leafed amarul tree, a shout rings out across the clearing: "Murderers!"

Our mysterious watcher shuffles out from the shadows, her face covered by a plain white mask, the colour of mourning. To my surprise, she's a Northerner – pale-pink skin and hair so white, it nearly gleams in the evening gloom. Every step she takes, aided by a roughly hewn wooden cane, is heavy, laboured – she's obviously of an advanced age, perhaps even in her sixtieth year or so. Add to that her plump, compact form and

she could be any number of women from Irfut, the village of my birth.

"You did this," she says, angrily shaking her cane at me. "This is your fault, Nuru!"

"You know who I am?" I'm so taken aback that she recognizes me as the Nuru – the one full-blooded daughter created by the mothers to free deathshrieks and alaki from the tyranny of the jatu – I forget my other concerns.

No one ever guesses my identity when I'm in my battle form, which is what I call the transformation my body undergoes whenever I'm primed for combat. Before, only my face changed: my skin mottled, my cheeks sharpened, and my eyes went black from rim to rim. Now, my entire body becomes rawboned and skeletal and my nails sharpen to claws. I could almost be mistaken for a deathshriek, except that deathshrieks are giants, their withered, humanlike bodies three times the size of a normal man, and that isn't even including their claws, full butcher knives tipping each finger.

"Everyone knows!" the woman rages. "Deka of Irfut. The one who looks like a deathshriek as she enters battle but is human-sized. The cursed daughter of the cursed goddesses."

My teeth grit. "Do not speak ill of my mothers." She can say what she wishes of me, but the Gilded Ones have already endured enough slander to last lifetimes.

In Irfut, the priests told us that the goddesses were actually ancient demons who'd ravaged Otera, slaughtering entire cities and eating children. We alaki were impure because we were their daughters: we carried their golden blood, their strength, speed, and a portion of their longevity. The only way to earn

purity – humanity – they said, was to help the empire fight against deathshrieks, monstrous creatures drawn by our blood.

They never mentioned, of course, that deathshrieks were actually alaki, resurrected by the Gilded Ones after death in terrifying forms so that we could fight the jatu-led human forces who wanted to drive the goddesses' line extinct.

"Then who else is to blame for this, for my daughter—" The woman points at the leftmost corpse, and nausea twists my gut.

The corpse is markedly curvier than the others, its hair looser in texture. A tiny cleft in its chin. In another life, it could've been me.

Not so long ago, my curls were looser and my eyes lighter, and I too, had a cleft chin. Then I moved to the Southern provinces and discarded the features I'd inherited from the man I once called Father – the grey eyes, the lightly curled hair, the chin. Now, my eyes are dark, my hair is tightly coiled and my chin is unremarkable. All that remains of the girl who was Deka of Irfut is my short stature and Northern accent, although that is now tinged with a distinctly Southern flair.

This is what it means to be the Nuru, the only full-blooded daughter of the goddesses: I can be whoever I choose.

The woman shudders with grief, tears streaming from her eyes. "My poor child. She never did anything, never once disobeyed the Wisdoms. But then you lot came, with your lies of freedom and another life for women. All she did was utter your name, speak a little of the Gilded Ones, and the priests came for her. They took her. She wasn't even an alaki; her purity had already been proven by the Ritual. But they said she

was wayward. That she would lead others into corruption. So they took her, tried to take me—"

She points again to the bloated corpse creaking in the night breeze. "Is this the freedom you promised us? Where are the goddesses you said would defend Oteran women? Where are they?"

Her pain is so great, I feel the justifications slipping from my lips. "They're sleeping, gathering their strength, but once they do—"

"What does it matter what they do?" The woman surges closer, grief having pushed her past all semblance of fear. "Before, there were rules. We knew how to live. How to survive. Now, there is nothing. I have nothing because of you. I *am* nothing because of you."

She falls to the ground at her daughter's feet, sobbing uncontrollably. "My girl, oh, my beloved girl."

Beside me, Nimita, a towering white deathshriek who has been assigned to our group, sighs with annoyance. Five deathshrieks accompanied us today – Katya, my former bloodsister, among them, of course, her red-spiked form distinct beside the others, whom I don't know as well – not that I'm making the effort. So many people have died over the past few months that sometimes it seems pointless to try to forge deeper connections.

"We do not have time for this, honoured Nuru," Nimita says, her voice a deep rumble.

Like all deathshrieks, she speaks in growls and hisses, but I understand her as perfectly as I would someone speaking Oteran. Another benefit of being the Nuru: I can understand all

the descendants of the Gilded Ones and even force them to obey my commands if I wish.

I angle my head towards her. "What do you suggest we do, incapacitate her and leave her out here with all the beasts?"

"That's always an option." As with most Firstborn, those alaki who were born during the time of the goddesses, Nimita is a creature of expediency. Dying and resurrecting as a deathshriek has not changed that part of her.

"I will not leave her." When I freed the Gilded Ones from their imprisonment in the mountains, I promised I would fight for the women of Otera – all women, not just the alaki. I return my attention to the old woman. "You cannot return to your home, and it is dangerous here. If you wish, I can have you taken to Abeya, the city of the goddesses. You'll be safe there."

"Safe." The woman hisses out the word. "There is no safety anywhere – not any more. Between you lot and Elder Kadiri" – she spits as she speaks the name of the Southern high priest who's now gathering the jatu armies together from all across Otera – "there's no place any woman can hide."

"Then how about freedom?" These words seem to catch the woman by surprise, so I quickly elaborate, using an echo of the speech my former instructor, White Hands, said to me over a year and half ago. "In Abeya, you can do anything you wish, be anyone you choose. All you have to do is make your way there."

I give her a moment to make her decision. "Now then, will you go? Or will you remain here for the beasts to devour?"

The woman's jaw juts. But then a small, barely yielding nod. She'll go.

"Very well." I turn to Chae-Yeong, a small, sleek black

deathshriek with a nub where her right hand should be. She was injured before her blood turned gold, and that injury followed her across death to this form. "Return with her to Abeya. We will continue on."

"But, honoured Nuru—" she begins, glancing at Nimita for guidance.

When the older deathshriek shakes her head, it takes everything I have not to clench my fists. I may be the Nuru, I may be the one who freed the mothers and ushered the One Kingdom into a new era, but to the Firstborn, I'll always be only seventeen years old – a blink of an eye to their kind, who have seen countless millennia. Add to that all the deathshrieks I killed before I knew what I was, and they and many other deathshrieks will never forgive me. Never truly trust me.

So I always have to prove myself. My dominance.

I step forwards. "Now," I insist, not even looking at Nimita.

"Yes, Nuru." Chae-Yeong genuflects, doing the small, swift kneel I've become so used to, before she approaches the woman. "Come, human," she growls, even though she knows the woman can't understand her. Deathshrieks tend to have very little patience with humans, but I don't blame them: it's hard being patient with people who always want you dead.

"Follow her," I say to the woman. "You won't come to any harm. I vow it."

"No." The woman quickly steps back. When I sigh, annoyance rising, she adds, almost timidly. "Not till they have been buried. I…lack the strength to pull them down myself."

I still, shame rising inside me. How could I forget such a simple human need? I've hardened much over the past few

months if I cannot even recognize the need of a mother to properly bury her child.

I turn to Chae-Yeong again. "Bury them first," I say quietly. "Then take her to Abeya."

"Yes, Nuru." Chae-Yeong genuflects again.

The woman nods her thanks to me, but I am already striding forward, my attention focused on the others. Time is short, and I cannot afford to spend any longer here than I already have. "Onward," I command, pointing at the spires of the bloodred temple rising above the jungle's mists. "To the Oyomosin."