**FIRST MARK**

Kyra stood in the shadows and watched the guard as he paced the camp, shifting the weight of the kalashik on his shoulder. Her nerves thrummed in anticipation. It was Maidul; she was sure of it. She was lucky he was on guard duty tonight, his thoughts louder than the whistling wind. If he had been asleep in his tent, she might not have been able to identify him.

She gripped her katari—the dagger she was bonded to—and swallowed hard. This was it: the ultimate test. Did she have what it took to be a Markswoman? Could she kill a man? She crept forward, footfalls soft on the sand, taking care to stay in the pools of darkness cast by the flapping tents.

But Maidul must have sensed something. He spun around, his eyes darting from the tents to the thorny ditch that surrounded the camp. Kyra froze, katari in hand. Surely he could not see her? There was no moon tonight, though the stars cast their silvery light on the dunes.

Oh no. She remembered, too late, the telltale glow of the blade of her katari. How could she have been such a fool as to forget it? Maidul stared right at her and whipped the gun down from his shoulder. Heart racing, Kyra summoned the Inner Speech, binding him before he could fire.

“Drop your weapon.”

He let go the kalashik; it landed with a soft thud that made her wince. But nothing stirred in the camp except the wind.

“You will not move or make a sound,” said Kyra in her most compelling voice. She approached him, trying to slow her pulse. Control yourself before trying to control others, the Mahimata always said.

Maidul’s face contorted. His forehead beaded with sweat, his jaw clenched in a snarl. She could tell that he was struggling to move, to shout. But he wouldn’t be able to, not as long as she held the mental bonds of the Inner Speech over him.

Kyra took a deep breath and said in a normal voice, “By the power vested in me by the Mahimata of Kali and the Kanun of Ture-asa, I, Kyra Veer of the Order of Kali, have come to grant you, Maidul Tau, the mercy of my blade. May you find forgive- ness for your crimes.”

She raised her blade for an overhead strike. But as she saw the plea in Maidul’s eyes, she paused, the blade hovering.

Kill him, you idiot. What are you waiting for?

But she couldn’t bring herself to do it. He looked helpless, terrified, his eyes darting from her blade to her face, his breath coming in short gasps. And he was young—no older than her. It didn’t feel right or just. How did the other Markswomen do it so easily? Why hadn’t Shirin Mam warned her she might react to his unspoken entreaty for life?

Maidul broke loose from her bonds. It was her fault; she hadn’t been paying attention, had underestimated his strength.

He threw himself on her, knocking her to the ground and pinning her beneath his weight. He gripped her blade hand, twisting it back until something tore inside her wrist. She gasped with pain and let go her weapon. As the katari slipped from her trembling fingers, a bubble of panic rose inside her.