



My Beautiful Enemy (Heart of Blade Book 2)

By Sherry Thomas

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~Chosen by NPR as one of their Great Reads of 2014~

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Their reunion, however, plunges them into a web of espionage, treachery, and deadly foes. With everything at stake, Leighton and Catherine are forced to work together to find a way out. If they are ever to find safety and happiness, they must first forgive and learn to trust each other again...

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My Beautiful Enemy (Heart of Blade Book 2) By Sherry Thomas Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #128117 in eBooks
- Published on: 2014-08-05
- Released on: 2014-08-05
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

Review

"Charlotte Anne Dore is a phenomenal narrator. She seemed as interesting in telling this story as I was in hearing it." ---Ramblings From This Chick

About the Author

Sherry Thomas, one of the most acclaimed historical romance authors writing today, has appeared on innumerable "Best of the Year" lists, including those of Publishers Weekly, Kirkus, and All About Romance. She is also a two-time winner of Romance Writers of America's prestigious RITA Award. Sherry lives in Austin, Texas. Visit her at sherrythomas.com.

Charlotte Anne Dore has been recording audiobooks since 2011, most of which have been historical romances. She has worked in film and television, but she mostly works in live theater and performance, with a focus on historical reenactments, ghost tours, mystery shows, and storytelling.

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"Something altogether different . . . Thomas is known for a lush style . . . With its transporting prose . . . it delivers on heat and emotion and a well-earned happily ever after."

—The New York Times Book Review

"ONE OF THE RISING STARS OF HISTORICAL ROMANCE."

—Booklist

"THOMAS . . . HAS MADE A NAME FOR HERSELF WITH HER EXQUISITE USE OF LANGUAGE."

—Library Journal

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

PROLOGUE

On a storm-whipped sea, some prayed, some puked. Catherine Blade wedged herself between the bed and the bulkhead of her stateroom and went on with her breathing exercises, ignoring fifty-foot swells of the North Atlantic and the teetering of the steamship.

A muffled shriek, faint but entirely unexpected, nearly caused her pooled chi to scatter. Really, she'd expected more reserve from members of the British upper class.

Then a blunt sound, that of an object striking the human body. She frowned. Was it a passenger banging into the furniture or had she heard an act of violence? She checked for the box of matches she carried inside her

blouse.

There was no light in the corridor—the electricity had been cut off. She braced her feet apart, held on to the doorknob, and listened, diving beneath the unholy lashing of the waves, the heroic, if desperate, roar of the ship's engines, and the fearful moans in staterooms all along the corridor—the abundant dinner from earlier now tossing in stomachs as turbulent as the sea.

The shriek came again, all but lost in the howl of the storm. It came from the outside this time, farther fore along the port promenade.

She walked on soft, cloth-soled shoes that made no sounds. The air in the passage was colder and damper than it ought to have been—someone had opened a door to the outside. She suspected a domestic squabble. The English were a stern people in outward appearance, but they did not lack for passion and injudiciousness in private.

A cross-corridor interrupted the rows of first-class staterooms. At the two ends of the cross-corridor were doors leading onto the promenade. She stopped at the scent of blood. “Who’s there?”

“Help . . .”

She recognized the voice, though she’d never heard it so weak. “Mrs. Reynolds, are you all right?”

The light of a match showed that Mrs. Reynolds was not all right. She bled from her head. Blood smeared her face and her white dressing gown. Next to her on the carpet sprawled a large, leather-bound Bible, likely her own—and likely the weapon with which she had been assaulted.

The ship plunged. Catherine leaped and stayed Mrs. Reynolds before the latter’s temple slammed into the bulkhead. She gripped Mrs. Reynolds’s wrist. The older woman’s skin was cold and clammy, but her pulse was strong enough and she was in no immediate danger of bleeding to death.

“Althea . . . outside . . . save her . . .”

Althea was Mrs. Reynolds’s sister Mrs. Chase. Mrs. Chase could rot.

“Let’s stop your bleeding,” she said to Mrs. Reynolds, ripping a strip of silk from the latter’s dressing gown.

“No!” Mrs. Reynolds pushed away the makeshift bandage. “Please . . . Althea first.”

Catherine sighed. She would comply—that was what came of a lifetime of deference to one’s elders. “Hold this,” she said, pressing the matchbox and the strip of silk into Mrs. Reynolds’s hands.

She was soaked the moment she stepped outside. The ship slanted up. She grabbed a handrail. A blue-white streak of lightning tore across the black sky, illuminating needles of rain that pummeled the ankle-deep water sloshing along the walkway. Illuminating a drenched Mrs. Chase, nightgown clinging to her ripe flesh, abdomen balanced on the rail, body flexed like a bow—as if she were an aerialist in midflight. Her arms flailed, her eyes screwed shut, her mouth issued gargles of incoherent terror.

A more distant flash of lightning briefly revealed the silhouette of a man standing behind Mrs. Chase, holding on to her feet. Then the heavens erupted in pale fire. Thunderbolts spiked and interwove, a chandelier of the gods that would set the entire ocean ablaze. And she saw the man’s face.

Lin.

A numb shock singed every last one of her nerve endings, so that she was cold and burning at once.

The man should be dead. He had been beheaded years ago, hadn't he? She wiped the rain from her eyes. But he was still there, the murderer of her child. He was still there.

Sometimes she could no longer recall her infant daughter's exact features, but always she remembered the warmth of holding the baby close—the awe that she should have been given such a wonderful child. Until she was sobbing over the baby's lifeless body, with nothing in her heart but despair and hatred.

A dagger from her vambrace hissed through the air, the sound of its flight lost in the thunder that rent her ears. But he heard. He jerked his head back at the last possible second, the knife barely missing his nose.

Darkness. The ship listed sharply starboard. Mrs. Chase's copious flesh hit the deck with a thud and a splash. Catherine threw herself down as two sleeve arrows shot past her.

The steamer crested a swell and plunged into the hollow between waves. She allowed herself to slide forward on the smooth planks of the walkway. A weak lightning at the edge of the horizon offered a fleeting glow, enough for her to see his outline.

She pushed off the deck and, borrowing the ship's own downward momentum, leaped toward him, one knife in each hand. He threw a large object at her. She couldn't see, but it had to be Mrs. Chase; there was nothing else of comparable size nearby.

She flipped the knives around in her palms and caught Mrs. Chase, staggering backward. The ship began its laborious climb up another huge swell. She set Mrs. Chase down and let the small river on deck wash them both toward the door. She had to get Mrs. Chase out of the way to kill him properly.

More sleeve arrows skimmed the air currents. She ducked one and deflected another from the back of Mrs. Chase's head with the blade of a knife.

She kicked open the door. Sending both of her knives his way to buy a little time, she dragged Mrs. Chase's inert, uncooperative body inside. A match flared before Mrs. Reynolds's face, a stark chiaroscuro of anxious eyes and bloodied cheeks. As Catherine set Mrs. Chase down on the wet carpet, Mrs. Reynolds, who should have stayed in her corner, docilely suffering, found the strength to get up, push the door shut, and bolt it.

"No!" shouted Catherine.

She preferred to fight outside, where there were no helpless women underfoot.

Almost immediately the door thudded. Mrs. Reynolds yelped and dropped the match, which fizzled on the sodden carpet. Catherine grabbed the matchbox from her, lit another one, stuck it in Mrs. Reynolds's hand, and wrapped a long scrap of dressing gown around her head. "Don't worry about Mrs. Chase. She'll have bumps and bruises, but she'll be all right."

Mrs. Reynolds gripped Catherine's hand. "Thank you. Thank you for saving her."

The match burned out. Another heavy thump came at the door. The mooring of the dead bolt must be tearing loose from the bulkhead. She tried to pull away from Mrs. Reynolds, but the latter would not let go of her. "I cannot allow you to put yourself in danger for us again, Miss Blade. We will pray and throw ourselves on God's mercy."

Crack. Thump. Crack.

Impatiently, she stabbed her index finger into the back of Mrs. Reynolds's wrist. The woman's fingers fell slack. Catherine rushed forward and kicked the door—it was in such a poor state now that it could be forced out as well as in.

As she drew back to gather momentum, he rammed the door once more. A flash of lightning lit the crooked edges of the door—it was already hanging loose.

She slammed her entire body into it. Her skeleton jarred as if she had thrown herself at a careening carriage. The door gave outward, enough of an opening that she slipped through.

His poisoned palm slashed down at her. She ducked. And too late realized it had been a ruse, that he'd always meant to hit her from the other side. She screamed, the pain like a red-hot brand searing into her skin.

The ship plunged bow first. She used its motion to get away from him. A section of handrail flew at her. She smashed herself against the bulkhead, barely avoiding it.

The steamer rose to meet a new, nauseatingly high wave. She slipped, stopping herself with the door, stressing its one remaining hinge. He surprised her by skating aft quite some distance, his motion a smooth, long glide through water.

Then, as the ship dove down, he ran toward her. She recognized it as the prelude to a monstrous leap. On flat ground, she'd do the same, running toward him, springing, meeting him in midair. But she'd be running uphill now, and against the torrent of water on deck. She'd never generate enough momentum to counter him properly.

In desperation, she wrenched at the door with a strength that should have been beyond her. It came loose as his feet left the deck. She screamed and heaved it at him.

The door met him flat on at the height of his trajectory, nearly twelve feet up in the air, and knocked him sideways. He went over the rail, over the rail of the deck below, and plunged into the sea. The door ricocheted into the bulkhead, bounced on the rail, and finally, it, too, hit the roiling waters.

The steamer tilted precariously. She stumbled aft, grasping for a handrail. By the time the vessel crested the wave and another flash of lightning split the sky, he had disappeared.

She began to laugh wildly—vengeance was hers.

Her laughter turned to a violent fit of coughing. She clutched at her chest and vomited, black blood into the black night.

CHAPTER 1

England

1891

For someone who had lived her entire life thousands of miles away, Catherine Blade knew a great deal about London.

By memory she could produce a map of its thoroughfares and landmarks, from Hyde Park in the west to the

City of London in the east, Highgate in the north to Greenwich in the south. On this map, she could pinpoint the locations of fashionable squares and shops, good places for picnics and rowing, even churches where everyone who was anyone went to get married.

The London of formal dinners and grand balls. The London of great public parks in spring and men in gleaming riding boots galloping along Rotten Row toward the rising sun. The London of gaslight, fabled fogs, and smoky gentlemen's clubs where fates of nations were decided between leisurely sips of whiskey and genteel flipping of the *Times*.

The London of an English exile's wistful memory of his gilded youth.

Those memories had molded her expectations once, in distant days when she'd believed that England could be her answer, her freedom. When she'd painstakingly made her way through Master Gordon's copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, amazed at the audacity and independence of English womenfolk, the liberty and openness of their lives.

She'd given up on those dreams years ago. Still London disappointed. What she had seen of it thus far was sensationally ugly, like a kitchen that had never been cleaned. Soot coated every surface. The grime on the exterior walls of houses and shops ran in streaks, where rain, unable to wash off the encrusted filth, rearranged it in such a way as to recall the tear-smudged face of a dirty child.

"I wouldn't judge London just yet," said kindly Mrs. Reynolds.

Catherine smiled at her. It was not London she judged, but the foolishness of her own heart. That after so much disappointment, she still hoped—and doomed herself to even more disappointment.

In any case, she had not come to make a home for herself in England. Her task was to retrieve a pair of small jade tablets and deliver them to Da-ren, Manchu prince of the first rank, uncle to the Ch'ing emperor, and her stepfather.

The jade tablets, three in all, were said to contain clues to the location of a legendary treasure. Da-ren was in possession of one of the tablets, but the other two had been taken out of China following the First Opium War.

"There they are," cried Mrs. Chase. "Annabel and the Atwood boys."

It was impossible to know Mrs. Chase for more than five minutes—and Catherine had known her five weeks, ever since Bombay—without hearing about her beautiful daughter Miss Chase, engaged to the most superior Captain Atwood.

Such boastfulness was alien to Catherine, both in its delivery—did Mrs. Chase not fear that her wanton pride would invoke the ill will of Fate?—and in its very existence.

Parental pride in a mere girl was something Catherine had never experienced firsthand.

At her birth, there had been a tub of water on hand—to drown her, in case she turned out to be a girl. In the end, neither her mother nor her amah had been able to go through with it, and she'd lived, the illegitimate daughter of a Chinese courtesan and an English adventurer who had died before she was born.

She'd been a burden to her mother, a source of anxiety and, sometimes, anguish. She'd never heard a word of praise from her amah, the woman responsible for her secret training in the martial arts. And Da-ren, the true father figure in her life, the man who'd brought her mother to Peking and given the latter a life of

security and luxury, Catherine had no idea what he thought of her.

And that was why she was in England, wasn't it, yet another attempt to win his approval?

Someday, she used to think, someday he would invite her to take a seat in his presence, and she would know for certain that she wasn't simply an obligation her mother had left him with. But that someday kept receding and he was no longer a young man. She tried not to imagine the very great likelihood that on his deathbed he would glance at her and sigh with a mixture of exasperation and disappointment.

On the rail platform, a handsomely attired trio advanced, a young woman in a violet mantle flanked by a pair of tall men in long, black overcoats. Catherine's attention was drawn to the man on the young woman's left. He had an interesting walk. To the undisciplined eye, his gait would seem as natural as those of his companions. But Catherine had spent her entire life in the study of muscular movements, and she had no doubt that he was concealing an infirmity in his left leg—the strain in his back and arms all part of a mindful effort to not favor that particular limb.

He spoke to the young woman. A strange curiosity made Catherine listen, her ears filtering away the rumble of the engines, the drumming of the rain on the rafters, the clamor of the crowd.

“. . . you must not believe everything Marland says, Annabel,” he said. His head was turned toward the others, the brim of his hat and the high collar of his greatcoat obscuring much of his profile. “My stay on the Subcontinent was entirely uneventful. The most excitement I had was in trying to keep a friend out of trouble when he fell in love with a superior's wife.”

She shivered. The timbre of that quiet voice was like the caress of a ghost. No, she was imagining things. He was dead. A pile of bones in the Takla Makan Desert, bleached and picked clean.

The other man, who spoke with a slight American accent, was adamant. “Then explain why your letters came only in spurts. Where were you all those months when we hadn't the least news of you?”

Miss Chase, however, was more interested in the love triangle. “Oh, how tragic. Whatever happened to your friend? Was he heartbroken?”

“Of course he was heartbroken,” said the man who refused to limp. “A man always convinces himself that there is something special about his affections when he fancies the wrong woman.”

Catherine shivered again. An Englishman who'd spent time in India, whose brother suspected that he'd been further afield than Darjeeling, and who had a lingering injury to his left leg—no, it couldn't be. She had to have been a more capable killer than that.

“You wouldn't be speaking from experience, would you, Leighton?” said Miss Chase, a note of flirtation in her voice.

“Only in the sense that every woman before you was a wrong woman,” answered the man who must be her fiancé, the most superior Captain Atwood.

A shrill whistle blew. Catherine lost the conversation. Mrs. Reynolds reminded her that she was to entirely comply with Mrs. Reynolds's desire to put her up at Brown's Hotel. Catherine suspected that Mrs. Reynolds, out of gratitude, planned to find Catherine a respectable husband. A tall task: Catherine had never come across a man willing to marry a woman capable of killing him with her bare hands—and easily, too.

Except *him*.

Until he changed his mind, that was.

The welcome party was upon them. Greetings erupted, along with eager embraces. Miss Chase's fiancé stood slightly apart, a cool presence at the periphery of this sphere of familial warmth.

His brother, golden and gregarious, should be more noticeable. *Was* more noticeable. But Captain Atwood was the man Catherine would immediately single out from a horde of a hundred for the danger he presented.

Latent danger. The danger of a man who knew how to handle himself. Who, like a predator of the jungle, was perfectly aware of his surroundings.

Her heart beat fast: This was how she had first noticed her lover, by his aura of control and perceptiveness.

She expelled a breath and, at last, looked directly at him.

A tall, dark, handsome man—remarkably handsome, one might say. Yet there was something extraordinarily understated about his person, something meant to deflect attention from himself, so that he could pass through the crowd like a shadow, little noticed except by those who had trained for years to be alert to just such hidden peril.

Catherine had never seen this man before.

Of course. What could she have been thinking? That not only would the lover who had betrayed her, and whom she had punished in turn, be miraculously alive after all these years, but that her friendship with Mrs. Reynolds, largely a product of chance, would lead her to him, on the other side of the world from where they had said their farewells?

No, such hopes were only for moments of weakness, moments of desperation, moments when she would rather lie to herself than submit to the bleakness of reality.

Now that the initial hugs and handshakes were out of the way, Mrs. Chase fussed over Captain Atwood. Mrs. Reynolds spoke to him eagerly. Miss Chase had her gloved hand on his arm. Even his brother tapped him on the shoulder, wanting a quick answer to some question.

Yet Catherine had the feeling that it was she, the stranger, who commanded the bulk of his attention—he was as keenly aware of her as she was of him, though he had not even looked in her direction.

But now he turned partly toward her—and she gazed into the green eyes from her nightmares.

If shock were a physical force like typhoons or earthquakes, Waterloo station would be nothing but rubble and broken glass. When remorse had come, impaling her soul, she'd gone looking for him, barely sleeping and eating, until she'd come across his horse for sale in Kashgar.

It had been found wandering on the caravan route, without a rider. She had collapsed to the ground, overcome by the absolute irreversibility of her action.

But he wasn't dead. He was alive, staring at her with the same shock, a shock that was slowly giving way to anger.

Somebody was saying something to her. “. . . Mr. Atwood. Mr. Atwood, Miss Blade. This is Miss Blade's very first trip to England. She has lived her entire life in the Far East. Mr. Atwood is on his grand tour after finishing his studies at Harvard University.”

“Please tell me that I did not overlook your society while I was in Hong Kong, Miss Blade. I would be devastated,” said Marland Atwood, with an eagerness to please that seemed to arise not from a need to be noticed but from an innate happiness.

She made herself smile. “No need for premature devastation, Mr. Atwood. I rarely ventured that far south. Most of my life has been spent in the north of China.”

“And may I present Captain Atwood?” Mrs. Reynolds went on with the introductions. “Captain Atwood, Miss Blade.”

Leighton Atwood bowed. Leighton Atwood—a real name, after all these years. There was no more of either shock or anger in his eyes, eyes as cool as water under ice. “Welcome to England, Miss Blade.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Words creaked past her dry throat.

Then she was being introduced to Annabel Chase. Miss Chase was young and very, very pretty. Wide eyes, a sweet nubbin of a nose, soft pink cheeks, with a head full of shiny golden curls and a palm as pliant as a newborn chick.

“Welcome to England, Miss Blade. I do hope you will like it here,” Miss Chase said warmly. Then she laughed in good-natured mirth. “Though at this time of the year I always long for Italy myself.”

Something gnawed at the periphery of Catherine’s heart. After a disoriented moment she recognized it as jealousy. Miss Chase was not only beautiful, but wholesome and adorable.

What had Leighton Atwood said to her? *Every woman before you was a wrong woman.*

Of course. A woman such as Catherine was always a wrong woman, anywhere in the world.

“Thank you,” she said. “It has been a remarkable experience already, my first day in England.”

* * *

Catherine could not stop looking at her erstwhile lover.

She glanced out of the corner of her eyes, or from below the sweep of her lashes. She pretended to examine the interior of the private dining room at Brown’s Hotel: the crimson-and-saffron wallpaper, the moss-green curtains, the large painting above the fireplace—two young women in white stolas frolicking against an dizzily blue sea that reminded her of Lake Kanas in the Altai Mountains—and then she would dip her gaze and let it skim over him.

Without the thick beard that had obscured the lower half of his face, he looked quite different. Not to mention, his black hair was cut short, leaving no hint of the curls through which she’d run her hands. The lobes of his ears still showed indentations of piercings, but the gold hoops he’d worn were long gone. And the deep tan that had fooled her so completely as to his origins had disappeared, too: Compared to the milk-white ladies at the table, he would still be considered bronzed, but to her he appeared pale. Pallid, almost.

He did not return her scrutiny, except once, when his brother seated himself next to her. He had glanced at her then, a hard, swift stare that made her feel as if someone had pushed her head underwater.

“Tell us about your life in China, Miss Blade,” said Marland Atwood. “And what finally brought you home to England?”

“My mother died when I was very young.” At least this part was true. Her next few sentences would be well-rehearsed lies. “I lived with my father at various localities in China, until he passed away several years ago. I suppose some would call him idiosyncratic—he did not seek the company of other English expatriates and rarely spoke of his life before China.”

Leighton Atwood did not roll his eyes, but the twist of his lips was eloquent enough.

She made herself continue. “Sometimes I, too, wonder why I didn’t venture out of China sooner—I’d always wished to see England, and in China I will always remain a foreigner. But the familiar does have a powerful hold. And part of me was afraid that perhaps in England, too, I would always be a foreigner.”

There was the faintest movement to his left brow. She could not interpret whether it expressed further scorn or something else.

“But that is nonsense!” exclaimed Marland Atwood. “You are home now. And we shall all of us endeavor to make you *feel* at home, too.”

She smiled at her former lover’s brother. “Thank you, Mr. Atwood.”

“I quite agree with Mr. Atwood,” declared Miss Chase. “I think it’s marvelous that you have come. You must not hesitate to let me know if there is anything I can do to help you become better settled.”

The girl was so fresh, so unsullied, a lovely, innocent Snow White—with Catherine very close to becoming the fading, malicious Queen. When she smiled this time, her face felt as if it were made of stone. “Thank you, Miss Chase. You are too kind.”

She glanced at Leighton Atwood. He appeared so . . . very English, so very proper and buttoned up. She could not imagine this man riding across the length and breadth of Chinese Turkestan in a turban and a flowing robe, sleeping under the stars, and hunting her suppers with a slingshot.

“Mrs. Reynolds, I understand that you and Miss Blade”—did she detect a slight hesitation, the space of a heartbeat, before he said her name?—“met in Bombay?”

“That is correct,” said Mrs. Reynolds. “We were introduced by Dr. Rigby, an old family friend.”

“Oh, I remember him—such a dear old man,” said Miss Chase. “How did the two of you meet, Miss Blade?”

Catherine supposed there was nothing for it, since Mrs. Reynolds and Mrs. Chase both already knew. “In Shanghai. Outside the ticket agent’s at Mortimer hong, I found Dr. Rigby’s wallet on the pavement.”

Miss Chase leaned back an inch. Mrs. Chase wore a look of sly satisfaction. Now it was out in the open: Catherine had not been introduced to Dr. Rigby by a known third party; therefore, what everyone knew of her was only what she chose to tell them. Leighton Atwood looked meaningfully at his brother.

“It sounds like a wonderful coincidence,” Marland Atwood said in oblivious cheerfulness.

“It was a stroke of luck for the rest of us, too,” said Mrs. Reynolds firmly. “Miss Blade kept us alive when we were set upon at sea.”

“Set upon?” exclaimed Miss Chase. “Surely not by pirates?”

“Only the most awful Chinaman,” answered Mrs. Chase. “Oh, darling, forgive us for not telling you sooner.”

It was a terrible ordeal. We thought we'd spare you the knowledge, if we could."

That said, Mrs. Chase launched into a luridly detailed account: her first glimpse of the insolent Chinaman during a shore excursion to Gibraltar, his aggressive pursuit of her, her virtuous attempts to avoid his distressing attention.

Miss Chase listened with wide eyes. Marland Atwood abandoned his lunch entirely. Mrs. Reynolds looked more than once toward Leighton Atwood and seemed discomfited by his carefully neutral expression—so Catherine was not the only one to suspect there might have been a reciprocal sexual interest on Mrs. Chase's part, at least initially.

Mrs. Chase was now vividly recreating the night of the storm off the coast of Portugal. The ocean that had the ship in its hungry maw. The hapless vessel, pitching and bobbing like a piece of refuse at high tide. The intruder in her cabin, subduing her, hauling her outside to set her on the railing, above the roiling black waters, tormenting her with visions of her own death.

She ended with a coy, "Then I knew no more."

"But what happened?" Miss Chase and Marland Atwood cried in unison.

"Miss Blade saved us," said Mrs. Reynolds quietly. "I couldn't. But she ventured out into the storm and brought back my sister. And when the man almost broke down the door, Miss Blade saved us once again."

"Did you bring him to justice, Miss Blade?" asked Marland Atwood, his eyes bright with an astonished admiration.

Catherine shook her head. "He fell overboard."

"That's justice enough for me," said Mrs. Reynolds.

"Hear, hear," said Marland Atwood.

"And were *you* all right, Miss Blade?" asked Miss Chase. She had one hand over her heart, the other clutching at Leighton Atwood's sleeve.

He had been gazing into his water goblet, but he looked at Catherine now. Pain suffused her, pain that had nothing to do with her injury—pain complicated with a twist of pleasure, like a drop of blood whirling and expanding in a glass of water.

"I was fine," she said. "Mrs. Reynolds was the one who suffered injuries."

When Mrs. Reynolds had satisfied everyone that despite the bandages under her turban, she was quite all right, Marland Atwood turned to Catherine. "But to single-handedly fight off a villain, Miss Blade, how did you manage it?"

For once, Catherine was happy that Mrs. Chase, even if she had seen something beyond her own misery, would not come forth with details of Catherine's strength and dexterity. "I had the advantage of surprise on my side, a great deal of luck, and the experience of taking a pot to a miscreant's head once in a while."

Marland Atwood laughed. "My goodness, Miss Blade. Do remind me to remain in your good grace at all cost."

Leighton Atwood's lips curled in a sardonic smile. "Yes, indeed. Do remind us."

* * *

Marland Atwood leaned forward. "Do you know what? Miss Blade's bravery made me remember the time Leighton faced down a lethal beast."

"What is that?" Miss Chase turned toward her fiancé. "I've never heard you mention any such deed."

"You never told her?!" Marland Atwood exclaimed in disbelief. He grinned at his brother. "You must have become quite a catch if Miss Chase accepted you without ever hearing that stirring tale."

"Well?" Miss Chase prompted, eager admiration in her eyes. "Won't you tell us, Leighton?"

"There isn't much to tell. A boy got too close to a tiger and I pulled him back."

Marland Atwood shook his head. "And if you listen to him, you'd have thought that our men in India daily ran in front of full-grown tigers. Allow me to tell it better. Sir Randolph Clive was a nabob who lived like a maharaja. He kept elephants and pet tigers. And one day, in the middle of a garden party, one of the tigers got loose."

"My goodness gracious," said Miss Chase.

Leighton Atwood turned the base of his water goblet a few degrees. There was no expression of modesty on his face, only detachment, as if he himself played not the least role in the tale.

He did not like being talked about, it struck Catherine. He did not like being the center of attention.

"Pandemonium ensued, of course, when the guests realized that a wild beast was in their midst," Marland Atwood continued. "The panicky ones climbed trees; the more sensible ones made for the house. And in all this commotion, no one realized that Sir Randolph's toddler son had left the house to pet the tiger, thinking it a big cat. The boy walked until he was no more than two feet away from the tiger."

"Oh no," Miss Chase whispered.

"The situation was precarious indeed. The tiger growled, a rumble full of menace. The boy stopped—but only for a moment." Marland Atwood paused dramatically. "Then he began advancing again. Women fainted. Men stood paralyzed. The servants came with Sir Randolph's rifles. But Sir Randolph, that ass—pardon my language, ladies—would not allow anyone to shoot it."

"Then what happened?" demanded Miss Chase, her hand on Leighton Atwood's shoulder.

"Then Leighton, cool as a cucumber, strolled up to the child, took him by the hand, bid the tiger to 'Stay where you are,' and delivered the boy to his eternally grateful mother."

"What valor!" gushed Mrs. Chase.

"Most impressive," declared Mrs. Reynolds.

"Most impressive indeed," Catherine murmured—not that she wasn't impressed, but of course he would have been the one to take charge when everyone else lost their heads. "And when was this, if I may ask?"

“Six or seven years ago,” answered Marland Atwood. “But nobody has forgotten it.”

How strange to think that in the eight years since their parting, Leighton Atwood had not merely survived, but had led a normal life, a life that included such things as attending garden parties, traveling on trains and ocean liners, and finding himself a suitable woman to marry.

“Ladies,” said Leighton Atwood, “you should know my brother was not present in person.”

“But I’ve heard it from a dozen eyewitnesses,” Marland Atwood retorted gleefully. “Of course, wouldn’t you know it, everyone who related the tale to me had been on the verge of doing something heroic, but Leighton beat him to it.”

“What a story.” Miss Chase beamed. She leaned into Leighton Atwood. “You should have told me. Are there any other harrowing tales you are keeping secret from me, Captain?”

His eyes met Catherine’s for the briefest second, an opaque, almost serene gaze. “No, my dear, there’s nothing important about me that you do not already know.”

CHAPTER 2

Chinese Turkestan

1883

Leighton enjoyed an oasis. But unlike the oases of the Arabian deserts, this particular oasis had no date palms. Though it did have farmlands and orchards that suddenly leaped into the view of the weary traveler, the verdant acres lively and defiant against the endlessly arid Takla Makan Desert, never far to the south.

There were also no natural springs. The crops and the fruit trees were irrigated by melted snow that had traveled miles from the nearest mountain, along an ancient and complex system of underground tunnels that had been constructed entirely by hand.

There were, however, Bactrian camels, a train of them just outside the courtyard of the open-air restaurant, feasting on grass and oats. Inside the courtyard, beneath the shade of grapevines growing on overhead trellises—he wondered what the French would think of the *terroir*—the clientele consisted mostly of traders and travelers, lured by the sizzling fragrance of spiced mutton grilling over an open fire and the yeasty aroma of freshly baked bread.

Once, great caravans had teemed on these routes, carrying precious bolts of Chinese silk across the vast steppes of central Asia to the coast of the Caspian Sea, to Antioch, and finally to Rome, to feed the empire’s ever ravenous desire for luxury fabrics.

The rise of great ocean-faring vessels had rendered the land courses obsolete hundreds of years ago. The caravans that still plied the route were small, sometimes no more than a few camels, trading between towns. And most of the legendary cities of yore were either lost or reduced to mere shadows of their former glory.

Yet a sense of continuity still lingered in the air. Marco Polo had drunk the same sweet, cool wine as that in Leighton’s cup, made from oasis-grown white grapes. A thousand years before that, Buddhist missionaries from India had braved the same perilous paths, carrying the teachings of the Tathagata into the western provinces of China.

Leighton, too, had traveled to China once—alone, with almost nothing in his pocket, and little more than an irrational hope in his heart.

Now he was again in China, at least technically. But Chinese Turkestan, currently controlled by the Ch'ing Dynasty, was of a different character altogether, a place of endless desert, vast blue skies, and snowcapped mountain ranges.

A new customer walked into the courtyard, a young Kazakh dressed in a knee-length robe and a fur-lined, long-flapped hat. They were in a predominantly Uyghur part of Tarim Basin, but one encountered Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Han Chinese, and even Mongols on the road. The diners looked up for only a moment before returning to their food and conversation. Leighton popped another chickpea into his mouth.

“Bring me soup and bread,” the young Kazakh ordered as he sat down. “Mind you skim the fat off the soup. And the bread had better be still warm.”

Leighton cast another glance at the Kazakh. Why did he think he had seen that face before?

The Kazakh now had a dagger in hand, scraping at the dirt underneath his nails. The weapon was six inches of deadly, gleaming blade, and he wielded it with no more care than if it were a toothpick. A man seated close to the entrance of the courtyard, who had been looking at the Kazakh with the interest of a pickpocket, turned back to his stew of sheep's brain.

The Kazakh's food arrived. He sheathed his dagger and attacked the round disk of bread, pausing only to wash it down with soup. Halfway through his meal, he flicked Leighton a hard look.

All at once it came to Leighton. Not when or where he had seen the Kazakh, but that last time he saw the face, it had belonged to a *girl*.

The memory was hazy, almost dreamlike, the kind of recollection that felt more imagined than real. Add to it the Kazakh's unfriendly bearing, grimy appearance, and affinity for sharp objects—Leighton was inclined to dismiss the notion out of hand.

And yet, now that the idea had arisen, he couldn't help but notice that the Kazakh was a tad too old to have such a perfectly smooth face. And wasn't his wrist, when it peeked out from his sleeve, a bit delicate in size for a man?

Not to mention his thick robe and close-collared shirt. At the edge of the desert, temperatures plunged directly after sunset. But now it was high noon on a spring day; the sun seared, the air hot and heavy even in the shade. Most of the other travelers had loosened their outer garments, but the Kazakh kept his closed and belted, even though he must be perspiring underneath.

She stopped eating—Leighton realized that he had changed the pronoun he used to think about the Kazakh. Instead she watched him, her gaze frosty. Her dagger, which had never left the table, was now once again unsheathed, the naked blade pointed directly at him.

He was not in Chinese Turkestan to make trouble. The goal of the British was to pass entirely unnoticed on their intelligence-gathering mission. In fact, he was already leaving, on his way to meet his colleagues in Yarkand. There they would debate whether to brave the Karakoram Pass directly into Kashmir, or tackle the relatively easier Baroghil Pass, still two miles above sea level, for a more circuitous route back to the raj.

The wise choice would be to stop gawking at the girl, finish his meal, and ride out. Until he was on Indian

soil, he was not entirely safe—the Ch’ing authority, who had recovered control over the territory only recently, was not kind to spies. And anything that could delay his return added to the risk of being found out.

Yet he could not shake the feeling that his seemingly unreliable memory of having seen her before was not something to be ignored. That it had not been a case of two random strangers passing each other, but an encounter of significance.

The nature of which significance just happened to elude him entirely.

He drank from his wine, then stood up, jug in hand, and seated himself opposite her—the unwise choice it was, then.

The people of these parts were by and large friendly and hospitable. It was not uncommon for strangers to sit down together and chat. “You look hot, friend,” he said in Turkic. “Have some of this wine.”

Up close, her eyes were the color of a desolate sea, charcoal grey tinged with blue. Her lips, greasy from lunch, were the dark red of aged claret.

Without a word, she picked up the wine jug he had pushed across the table at her, held it above her head, and poured a fine stream straight down her throat.

The grace and precision of her action, the way her throat moved as she swallowed—his awareness of her was suddenly the sort to elevate his heart rate.

“Good wine,” she said, sliding the jug back to him. “Many thanks.”

When he glanced down at the wine, he saw that the dagger had also found its way across the table, its tip no more than two inches from his chest. He turned it around, and with a flick at the pommel, sent it skidding directly back into its scabbard.

“Good blade,” he said.

Her eyes narrowed. She slapped the table from underneath. The sheathed dagger leaped up a foot off the table, still perfectly horizontal. She knocked the dagger with her soup spoon. It flew directly at him.

He barely deflected it with the wine jug. The dagger fell to the table with a loud clatter.

One thing was clear: The show of force removed any doubt of her gender. Only a young woman traveling by herself would be so wary of being approached by a man offering wine and friendship.

“Is this how the Kazakhs repay hospitality?” he asked.

She glanced around at the startled diners. Quickly, eating and talking recommenced on the part of the latter. She turned back to him. “What do you want, stranger?”

“Am I a stranger to you?”

“I’ve never laid eyes on you before. Of course you are a stranger to me,” she said scornfully. But she did return the dagger to her belt.

“But I have seen you. I don’t remember when or where, except that I have seen you.”

“So what?” Her small teeth sank into a piece of carrot from the soup. “I have seen a thousand strangers on these roads. Passed them without a backward glance.”

She was full of thorns, and just short of loutish. But strangely enough, he felt more at ease with her than with a roomful of eminently proper English misses.

“Where are you headed?” he asked.

He wasn’t usually so loquacious. Though he absorbed languages with the ease of white cloth in a vat of dyes, he rarely spoke unless spoken to, in any of those languages.

“West,” she answered tersely. “You?”

She was studying his face. There were places in the world where his green eyes would be a dead giveaway of his racial origin. But fortunately, in the heart of Asia, there existed natives with eyes of sky and forest, and every color in between. And he was now sufficiently tanned to pass for one of them.

“West, too.” Then he surprised himself by telling something close to the truth. “Kashmir is my eventual destination.”

“Lucky you.”

“Have you been to Kashmir?” And was that where he might have met her?

She shook her head. “No, but I’ve heard it’s a nice place.”

There was an odd wistfulness to her voice, the way an invalid stuck at home might speak of the world outside. She lifted the wine and drank as she did before, her fragile-looking wrist remarkably steady as she suspended the heavy jug above her mouth.

He swallowed. There was nothing retiring, modest, or pliant about her. Yet for reasons he couldn’t fathom, he found her blatantly, ragingly feminine, like a pearl at the tip of a knife.

She set down the jug. Their gazes met—and held. She had been wary and hostile, but now she was tense in a way that seemed not entirely related to her earlier distrust of him.

Pushing away what was left of her soup, she asked, “Where are *you* from?”

She knew, the thought came to him. She knew that he had seen through her disguise.

“Persia.” He gave his standard answer—Parsi was one of his strongest languages.

“You are far from home.”

There was an accent to her Turkic, and not a Kazakh one—the only thing Kazakh about her, as far as he could see, was her clothes. Perhaps Turkic wasn’t her mother tongue. But so many different variations of the language were spoken over such a large territory by so many different people, it was quite possible that she hailed from an area or a tribe unfamiliar to him.

“Some of us are not meant to grow old where we are born,” he said. “You, my friend, are you also far from home?”

A shadow passed over her face, something almost like pain, as if home was so distant as to be beyond reach. Then she shrugged. "Home is wherever I am."

Oddly enough, he felt an answering pang of longing. Not so much for the mortar and bricks of home, but for the idea of it, that safe, happy place he had once known. "Where will you be making your home next?"

She thought for a moment. "Kashgar."

He would reach Yarkand much more conveniently by turning south a hundred miles or so before Kashgar and following the course of the Yarkand River upstream. But he found himself reluctant to contemplate that faster path. He did not want them to part so soon, still strangers.

"Perhaps we can share the road for a few days, if you are traveling alone."

After having traversed the territory all the way to the Altai Mountains and back, another hundred miles or two hardly mattered.

If, that was, she agreed to it.

Surely she must understand the average criminal would gravitate toward an easier quarry. And she was a poor target if one were out for gold: Her blue tunic was frayed at the cuffs and the hem, the embroidery along the lapels long ago soiled into squiggles of greasy black.

She popped the last piece of bread into her mouth. A desire to kiss her, bread crumbs and all, shot through him like a bullet.

"Well, the road does get lonely," she said.

She did not move—or at least he could swear she did not move. Yet all at once she twirled a palm-size grape leaf by its stem. It was early yet in the year; the vine that spread on the trellis overhead was not weighed down by ripe clusters of fruit. He would have to stand with an arm stretched to pluck a leaf. Yet she had done it while remaining perfectly still in her seat.

As a warning, it was far more sobering than a rattling of the dagger. She was stating, quite plainly, that she could cut his throat before he even knew what happened.

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